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KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION

Faculty of Business Economics

Master of Management

Master's thesis

Successfully using Appreciative Inquiry to facilitate organisational change: Inquiring into the experiences of AI practitioners

Jan Driesen

Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management, specialization Strategy and Innovation Management

SUPERVISOR :

Prof. dr. dr. Frank LAMBRECHTS

MENTOR :

Mevrouw Nguyen Phuong Anh DUONG



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COVID-19 DISCLAIMER

This master thesis was written during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020-2021. This global health crisis might have had an impact on the (writing) process, the research activities and the research results that are at the basis of this thesis.

PREFACE

This master thesis is the crown jewel of my career as a student at Hasselt University. It embodies two years of hard work and personal and professional development. There were a couple of moments in which finishing this paper seemed to be impossible. Writing a thesis during a pandemic turned out to be quite a challenge. However, the final product came to fruition, but not without the help of a couple of pivotal people.

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, prof. dr. dr. Frank Lambrechts, who not only provided me with the opportunity of a lifetime by allowing me to perform this research but also guided me through it, giving me the freedom to perform the study as I felt was right. Alongside Mr Lambrechts stood my mentor, Miss Phuong Anh Duong, who always gave me valuable feedback within a couple of days of sending in a question or a draft version. Both Frank and Anh have helped me a lot to finalize this paper.

Secondly, I would like to thank all the AI practitioners that took over an hour out of their busy schedules to converse with me and tell me all about their stories and experiences. Annet van de Wetering, Arno Vansichen, Barbara van Kesteren, Cora Reijerse, Heike Aiello, Herman Wittockx, Joep C de Jong, Koen Joly, Luc Verheijen and Robbert Masselink, you have made me *appreciate* and respect your craft even more. Our conversations were interesting and educational, but most of all, they were energetic and very enjoyable.

Lastly, my friends and family also deserve some appreciation for supporting me throughout this process. I want to thank Emilie Houten, Nele Schouteren, Mats Ceusters, Kim Govaerts and Kiryl Maltsav in particular for aiding me when I needed it. Without them, this paper would have never been finished.

Jan Driesen
May 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the growing body of literature about Appreciative Inquiry, there are still some topics that seem to be overlooked. There are still various sides of the AI story that remain to be inquired into, such as the requirements of the AI facilitator. In 2011, Bushe expressed his curiosity towards an AI facilitator's competencies to successfully facilitate an AI change process. He also indicated that the current literature about this topic is scarce. This inspired this research to explore that side of the story with a qualitative research approach based on the stories and experiences that AI practitioners narrated during in-depth interviews. Early on in the process, it became clear that the focus of the facilitators was not on their competencies, but their attitude towards Appreciative Inquiry, which is why the main focus of the research shifted accordingly. As this research answers the question 'How can Appreciative Inquiry be successfully used to facilitate organisational change from the perspective of the Appreciative Inquiry change facilitator?', I attempt to combine the expertise and knowledge embedded in the minds of successful AI practitioners. As a result, four themes emerged from the findings, namely; the influence of the AI facilitator on the process, the influence of the participating organisation on the process, the connection, trust and involvement between all parties, and the process architecture.

After conducting a literature review based on the foundational articles about Appreciating Inquiry, the general ideas and philosophy behind the method became clear to me. Using a theoretical sampling approach allowed a degree of openness that resonates with AI's core idea of being open to whatever comes up. This enabled me to inquire into what seemed to be important for the facilitators, which eventually constitutes the bulk of the findings. During 10 in-depth interviews of about 80 minutes each, I conversed with the practitioners about their best experiences and their attitudes towards AI. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded a total of three times to categorize and analyse the data. The more the research progressed, the clearer the threads in attitude, mindset and approach became.

The findings of this research suggest that for Appreciative Inquiry to be used successfully, the AI practitioner behind the process has to fundamentally agree with the ideas and philosophy of AI. As an AI facilitator is more than his/her competencies, it is important for him/her to not just use AI as a method or a tool, but to embody it to a certain extent. The success of the process relies more on the way he/she brings it than on what he/she can do or knows. Both the facilitator and the participants of the process influence its outcome, which is why they have to be strongly connected through trust and conversation. The earlier this connection can take place, the better. However, the organisation must allow this connection to form, they must be open and willing to change, which mostly depends on the organisational leaders that have to set the right culture throughout the organisation. As the organisational culture is what undergoes the largest change during an AI process, educating the leaders of the participating organisation about AI is crucial to the outcome of the process. The leaders must understand what it is about. They must be on the same wavelength as the facilitator.

An AI facilitator's instinct is to connect people and sense what is needed at the moment. To the core of their characteristics, facilitators believe that every situation has a positive side to it, they have a true belief in humankind. An AI facilitator's influence during the process, however, is limited to a certain degree and mostly, but not exclusively, felt during his/her on-stage moments. Therefore, his/her attitude is crucial to the outcome of the process. A successful facilitator is open-minded without prejudice. His/her attitude reflects the AI philosophy to set the right example for the participants while being humble and realising that growth and development are continuously happening. The facilitator's role is that of a guide and a coach that shows the participants an alternative route to collectively move towards their desired future while strengthening their relationships, boosting creativity and innovation and enthusing them about the future. With an Appreciative Inquiry approach, the facilitator is given the language to empower people and helps them co-create their shared image of the ideal future.

Although the facilitator's attitude might be the foundation of a successful process, his/her influence goes further. Having a clear process architecture to follow enables the facilitator to be completely involved during the process, which is imperative for the bonding process. This process architecture contains a preparation, a set-up for the approach towards the process itself and a decent follow-up protocol, all of which provide a guideline, a roadmap to success. Some crucial principles must be applied in a facilitator's approach towards his/her craft. Principles such as *including the whole system in the room*, *holding the space*, *setting the right atmosphere*, and as a result of all that, *being able to cope with negativity*, have proven to positively influence the outcome of an AI process and consequently, enable the group to collectively move towards their desired shared reality. Even though Appreciative Inquiry's main focus leans a bit more towards the positive, the true change happens in what is *valuable*, which does not necessarily imply what is *positive*. In this shared sense of reality, all the valuable stories and experiences must be included, as substantiated by the principle of including the whole system in the room.

These findings extend the scope of Bushe's initial question about the required competencies of an AI facilitator. It points out that a facilitator's competencies will always be inferior to his/her attitude and way of bringing the process. This study provides a new perspective on AI, a topic that seems to be saturated and scattered in terms of literature. By combining the experiences and stories of the AI practitioners, this study showcases their shared reality in which they express what is important for them and what they focus on during their processes. The bundle of stories reveal some overarching customs that constituted the foundation for a set of best practices to be found in this study. Furthermore, it outlines what goes on in the collective mind of these facilitators, enabling us to have a glimpse of how successful facilitators see the world and bring themselves.

As the literature about Appreciative Inquiry from the perspective of the facilitator is still relatively scarce, more research is needed to deduct a decisive conclusion regarding the topic. Although this paper answers some questions, many others came up. I hope this study can inspire others to continue the course and build upon the ideas proposed here.

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to discover how Appreciative Inquiry can be successfully used to facilitate organisational change from the perspective of the Appreciative Inquiry change facilitator. The findings of this research contribute to a growing body of literature, but offers a new and alternative perspective on what makes an AI process successful. Using a theoretical sampling approach with in-depth interviews as the main base of data, this paper discovers that an Appreciative Inquiry change process is more successful when its facilitator sees AI as more than a method and fundamentally agrees with the philosophy. The facilitator is aware that he/she influences the process, but that the participants' influence is larger. To manage this influence, the connection between both parties is crucial. As facilitators are more than their competencies, the success of the Appreciative Inquiry process is more about their attitude and beliefs than it is about their competencies and knowledge. Successful facilitators behave openly, know what AI is about, believe that there is something positive in every situation and fundamentally agree with the AI philosophy. A successful facilitator acts as a guide during the process and uses AI because it empowers people. They have a natural instinct to connect people and feel their needs. Furthermore, the outcome of the process also depends on the process architecture in which a decent preparation, the right, tailored approach and a decent follow-up protocol are needed. A successful facilitator is aware that negativity will come up somewhere along the process and accepts that.

KEYWORDS

Appreciative inquiry, AI, organisational change, AI facilitator, AI practitioner, process architecture, shadow dimension of appreciative inquiry, positive change, change management

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1. INTRODUCTION

Before deciding on the research question of this paper, it was imperative to be as knowledgeable as possible about the topic and to understand the method and philosophy behind it and the way these are used. The theoretical base, displayed in this paper, is the product of "being one" with the literature for weeks. I worked my way through the literature, starting from the very beginning with Cooperrider & Srivastva's paper from 1987, up to more recent literature, while always staying close to the foundational articles. Having sifted through this literature, it stood out that many articles tell a similar tale. They all go into the principles and methods behind AI, which constitutes the bulk of knowledge about the topic. There was a noticeable lack of literature about the people behind the process and their capabilities to successfully guide such an AI process. After reading Bushe's 2011 paper, *Appreciative inquiry: Theory and critique*, his curiosity towards the required competencies of the AI facilitator/consultant sparked my interest. Due to my enthusiasm for AI and my passion for consultancy, the question "can any clever person with a *positive attitude* learn to facilitate AI summits well?" was stuck in my mind. Since there was no clear base of knowledge to start from when looking into the person behind the process, it was up to me to initiate that foundation. Therefore, the question became a bit broader to find out from experiences what is truly important for these processes first and thus, that became the building block for this research.

This qualitative research inquires into how Appreciative Inquiry can be successfully used to facilitate organisational change from the

perspective of the Appreciative Inquiry change facilitator. Implementing a theoretical sampling approach allowed for a certain degree of openness that resonates with AI's principle that one should be open to whatever comes up. Using interviews as the main source of data, the findings in this research are very much focused on experiences and stories, which makes for a dynamic breakdown of what makes an AI process successful. The initial intent was to inquire into the competencies of these practitioners. However, after the first interview it became clear that the focus should not be on their competencies, but their attitude. Therefore, the emphasis of this research shifted from inquiring into competencies to inquiring into the practitioner and having a conversation instead of a one-sided interview.

This study contributes to a branch of AI literature that is still relatively scarce, namely the perspective of the AI facilitator. Although a lot of research has been conducted about AI in general, the literature seems to have overgrown and appears scattered without a clear sense of cohesion. After the initial articles, written by the founders of AI during the latter years of the '90s and the early years of the '00s, there have been few groundbreaking new contributions to the literature. Therefore, this study goes back to these foundations but looks at them from the perspective of successful AI practitioners.

At the start of this paper, the literature study clarifies the most important basic knowledge that should be known to understand the context of the findings. The literature study discusses how Appreciative Inquiry started and expanded. It explains the underlying principles that support all there is to know

about the philosophy. It illustrates what goes on during an AI process, starting with the AI dimensions, the 4-D cycle and the conditions and success factors. Lastly, the literature review points out a model for personal reflection that broadens society's competence-based reflection, as to understand how one can reflect upon his/her performances on a deeper level.

The methodology section explains in detail how every conversation was transformed into the data that eventually led to the findings. These findings elaborate on four large themes that affect the outcome of the Appreciative Inquiry change process. Using frameworks, the themes are illustrated to explain their relation towards one another, but also the internal dynamics that take place. The distinguished themes are; (1)the influence of the participating organisation, (2)the influence of the facilitator, (3)connection, involvement and trust, and lastly, (4)the process architecture.

Firstly, since we are looking to find what affects the outcome of the process, all parties have to be looked at. The findings point out that the participating organisation has a large influence on the outcome of the process. Cooperrider & Whitney (1997) already indicated early on that it is important to educate the leaders of the participating organisation. However, this study emphasizes its importance and presents experience-based evidence as to why it is so crucial for the success of the process.

Secondly, if the participants affect the outcome, logic would suggest that so does the facilitator. As a facilitator guides the process, his/her assumptions and view on the world will

inevitably be induced into the way he/she carries him/herself and into the process. However, the findings indicate that a facilitator's influence is only limited and mostly takes place when he/she fulfils his/her professional role. The AI Personality framework opens up the mind and heart of a successful AI practitioner. The framework is inspired by Korthagen's (2014) Onion Model, and reflects on the facilitator's personality in 7 different levels; (1) the facilitator's core qualities, (2) his/her mission for using AI, (3) his/her beliefs about AI, (4) his/her attitude during the process, (5) his/her role during the process, (6) the required competencies to fulfil this role and lastly, (7) the environment he/she finds him/herself in. Using these seven levels of self-reflection, we can discover what a successful AI facilitator is made of.

Thirdly, if both the participants and the facilitator affect the outcome of the process, their connection with each other does as well. In 1987, Cooperrider & Srivastva already indicated that the bond between the facilitator and the participants of the process is important. The findings point out that the connection is not just important, but crucial for the success of the AI process. It goes even further than only the reciprocal bond between both parties. Connection also applies to the connection between the participants, the connection and involvement each party has with the process, and if there are multiple facilitators, they have to be connected as well. These connections develop through conversation and trust and have the potential to create a shared sense of reality.

Lastly, the craftsmanship of *facilitatorship* is in the design of the process. Since the facilitator influences the success of the process, so does

his/her approach towards it. Very little has been written about this in current literature, while the facilitators and thus the findings do illustrate the importance of having a thorough process architecture in place. This contains a solid preparation, the approach towards the process itself and a follow-up protocol that converts the ideas and decisions into action.

In conclusion, the discussion section of the paper explains how all the individual parts relate to each other, enabling the reader to see the bigger picture. As the initial question of this paper addresses quite a few elements, the *opportunities for future research* section explains that a lot more research is needed to formulate one decisive answer to the question of how Appreciative Inquiry can be successfully used by an AI practitioner to facilitate organisational change. This study attempts to spark that interest amongst fellow researchers and practitioners in the hope that another finds the courage and time to continue this journey.

2. APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

2.1 Take-off

In their 1987 paper, Cooperrider & Srivastva laid the foundations of the concept that is known as Appreciative Inquiry. What was then presented as a *conceptual reconfiguration of action research* (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) went on to become one of the world's most effective methods for organisational change. Cooperrider & Srivastva's paper covered the basic principles and the logic behind the concept which can be found at the core of every other work about Appreciative Inquiry, including this one.

Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based approach to organisational change that draws its power from collaborations of the stakeholders in the matter. It was developed as an alternative method for organisational change and transformation as opposed to the more commonly used deficit-based approaches that focus on organisational problems to fix what is wrong. AI, on the contrary, inquires into the positive core of organisations, focusing on their strengths and looking to determine what gives life to an organisation while tapping into the imaginative capacity of the participants (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Grieten et al., 2018; Cooperrider, 1990; Cooperrider, 2012).

According to Cooperrider and Srivastva, Appreciative Inquiry is more than a method or technique. It reflects itself in the way people live with, and participate in social organisations. It is meant to stimulate the search for knowledge, and the discovery, understanding and encouragement of social innovations during organizational processes. This enables them to collectively move towards their desired future while boosting employee involvement and motivation, company culture, and their overarching vision for the organisation (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider, 1990; Busche, 2007; Busche & Marshak, 2009; Marshak & Busche; 2009).

2.2 Underlying principles

Appreciative Inquiry, however, is not as vague a concept as it seems to be. It is built upon a strong theoretical foundation of principles that substantiate the entire AI method. In 1997, Cooperrider & Whitney discussed five foundational principles that are at the heart of Appreciative Inquiry. These principles explain

how change occurs as a result of the AI Process.

2.2.1 The Constructionist Principle

The constructionist principle is at the very core of Appreciative Inquiry. This implies that reality is merely the way humans perceive what happens around them. Therefore, there is no one objective truth, only what people make of it. The way people interact with each other creates meaning, which will eventually determine their reality. In his 1963 Keynote, Abraham Joshua Heschel was the first to state that “*Words Create Worlds*”. The constructionist principle heavily relies on this philosophy as the way people speak determines the co-constructed reality among them and therefore it influences the way we view the future. This further implies that the words we use impact our reality. Energetic and positive words will positively influence reality, while negative words will do the opposite (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

2.2.2 The Principle of Simultaneity

Inquiry and change are no two separate moments, they happen simultaneously. The process of inquiry starts with a thought, which is then converted into language that will create the very stories constructing reality. The simultaneity principle implies that even the most innocent questions have the potential to evoke change. Therefore, it is imperative to be aware of the impact a question has on the external world. Articulating the right questions is one of the most impactful things an AI facilitator/consultant can do (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

2.2.3 The Poetic Principle

Nothing is set in stone. Reality is constantly being co-constructed by the choices people make. Building further upon the constructionist principle, people have the power to direct their own story. What people focus on, will determine what they find. Therefore, focusing on positivity, on what gives life to an organization, will result in finding more positivity and life-giving factors. The poetic principle helps to create an understanding of what works and why it works. As the positive feelings associated with the positive stories reawake, people once again feel energy and inspiration that resonates with bystanders (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

Every experience is an unlimited source of learning and inspiration that can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, just like a good piece of poetry or a piece of literature. We are free to inquire into whatever we please. The possibilities are endless. The poetic principle challenges the more popular deficit-based strategies by inviting us to reconsider our focus of inquiry during change processes. We are being challenged to step away from the dominating organizational mindset of seeing the world as a problem (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

2.2.4 The Anticipatory Principle

The imaginative capacity of humankind might be the greatest resource there is for generating change. Positive images about the future evoke positive actions in the present. This method of visualization has been used by professionals in various fields for a vast amount of reasons. The anticipatory principle reflects itself in Appreciative Inquiry as the

idea that when organisations construct an inspiring, powerful vision about the future, it's capacity to realise that vision increases. Creating this calling for change provides a sense of urgency, which is important for change. As opposed to urgency created by problems, positive visions act as an irresistible and energetic force that pulls people towards that desired future (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

"If you have a clear picture in your head of something that is going to happen, and a clear belief that something will happen no matter what, then it's going to happen. It's destined to happen no matter what" (Conor McGregor, 2014).

Cooperrider's 1990 paper "Positive Image, Positive Action", discusses positive imagery as a key factor in every action. The following concepts are popular areas in research that illustrate how positive images can evoke positive actions. These concepts are at the very core of the anticipatory principle.

The Placebo Effect

The Placebo response is a popular phenomenon in medicine in which individuals are subjected to a mock remedy while believing that the remedy is legit. Against the odds, a large percentage of placebo subjects positively respond to the Placebo remedy, implying that positive beliefs have an undeniable effect on the healing process. Since Beecher's initial publishing of "The Powerful Placebo" in 1955, many studies have been conducted to understand the working of this concept, with a variety of conclusions as a result. The Placebo effect has since then been researched in many other contexts as well. The anticipatory principle draws its

power from the application of the Placebo effect in organizational change, implying that the power of positive beliefs and visualization affects the mind and body to move towards a powerful positive outcome (Cooperrider, 1990; Jaffe & Bresler, 1980; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012)

The Pygmalion Effect

While the Placebo effect connects beliefs with an individual's situation, the pygmalion effect, introduced by Rosenthal & Jacobson in 1968, links beliefs with the construction of others. It implies that the expectations and images that people tend to project onto each other have the capacity to shape their reality, thereby indicating how impactful mental projections of others can be to the lives of an individual. An individual's cognitive ability is determined and shaped by the images of their expectations, limiting their imagination to only what they allow themselves to see. In this perspective, the Pygmalion effect implies that projecting positive expectations and beliefs on one another, paves the way for a positive future (Cooperrider, 1990; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997).

Positive Emotion

Many studies have established that focusing on a particular vision can evoke strong feelings within an individual as if the imaginative vision is real (Sheikh and Panagiotou, 1975). Therefore, focusing on positive feelings like joy, passion, happiness, and many others, might be a pivotal factor for realizing positive images (Cooperrider, 1990). Other studies even go as far as illustrating the connection between negative images and diseases, implying that the host of a disease oftentimes resorts to negative images that lead to feelings of hopelessness and

helplessness (Ley and Freeman, 1984; Watson and Clark, 1984; Seligman, 1975; Brewin, 1985; Beck, 1967; Peterson and Seligman, 1984; Schultz, 1984). However, positivity makes people less self-oriented and makes them focus even more on the positive. When focusing on positive emotions, people tend to become more supportive of each other and act more charitable. The more we focus on the positive, the more positivity we tend to find, and the more positive our lives become (Cooperrider, 1990).

Internal dialogue

The concept of the internal dialogue indicates that an image is a conceptualization of self-talk. One's inner dialogue is a combination of positive and negative thoughts that act as a navigator for one's actions (Schwartz & Ward, 1986). Implementing this in an organizational context implies that the actions an organization carries out, are constructed by the inner dialogue between the people within. This inner dialogue impacts the way we experience, interpret and envisage reality, both on an internal and an external level (Cooperrider, 1990).

Cultural vitality

The impact of organizational culture has been a research topic for many years. Various studies have conducted a plethora of results. The majority of these results imply that organizational culture, which is generally defined as a shared set of beliefs and values within an organization, strongly influences the future of this organisation. In his 1973 study, Polak implies that the fluctuation of images foreshadows the rise and fall of cultures. Culture can only keep flourishing in a society filled with positive images, which can only emerge in an optimistic context. Positive

imagery is not so much about the intellectual competencies, but rather about the emotional. As already mentioned, positive images promote positive actions that turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy which has the potential to launch individuals to participate in this positivity, and if cultural positivity decreases, so does the potential for the culture (Polak, 1973; Cooperrider, 1990).

Metacognitive competence

Metacognitive capacity relates to the ability to consistently examine successful and or unsuccessful performances, through positive and negative self-monitoring. This enables one to adopt the most appropriate cognitive process when needed. Human systems, however, have been observed to evolve towards positive images. According to Nicklaus, 1974, the entire body, much like cultures, reacts to the imaginative boundaries set by the mind. Since mind and body are strongly connected, this affirmative competence is just as important as physical capability and can be learned through practice and self-control. Popular opinion seems to assume that the riddance of failure will enhance one's performance, but when talking about acquiring new skills, the reverse seems to be true, as failure can act as a learning mechanism (Nicklaus, 1974; Cooperrider, 1990)

2.2.5 The Positive Principle

This principle is a product of many years of experience in the field of Appreciative Inquiry. The positivity principle strongly resonates with the anticipatory principle. A lot of positivity and social bonding is required to build, and more importantly, sustain momentum for change. There is a direct correlation between the positivity of the questions asked during a

change process and the success and duration of the change effort. Looking at the world from a positive perspective is key for success. Looking at mistakes with a “*win or learn*” mentality makes us understand why things don’t work and how to improve. When looking at the successes that are already there and emphasizing what works, people tend to become reenergized to strive towards their common goal (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

2.3 The Process

Since the introduction of Appreciative Inquiry in 1987, there has been a quest to come up with a set of practices that would act as the base of every AI process. Since Cooperrider wanted the public to see Appreciative Inquiry as a philosophy, a way of living and not as a corporate technique or strategy, it took as much as a decade for him to write down the long-awaited blueprint which is now universally known and accepted as the 4-D model of Appreciative Inquiry (Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997)

2.3.1 Dimensions of Appreciative Inquiry

For over 15 years, AI facilitators/consultants relied on the initial four principles introduced by Cooperrider & Srivastva in their 1987 paper (Bushe, 2011). These four principles were the forefathers of the 4-D cycle as we know it today. These are the four dimensions of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Principle 1: Research into the potential of organisations should start with appreciation. This implies that the purpose of the research is to discover, describe and explain life-giving elements within organisations by looking at the current state of “what is”. The aim is to

understand these factors to capitalize on them and heighten the energy and potential of the organisation in the process (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Principle 2: Research into the potential of organisations should be applicable. The conducted research must be more than an academic piece of work. The knowledge generated from Appreciative Inquiry should be applicable in everyday business activities. The findings of the AI process should be of relevance to the focal organization (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Principle 3: Research into the potential of organisations should be provocative. Inquiring into “what is” suggests the potential of “what might be”, which creates a vision of an ideal future. Since organisations can become more than they are at any given moment and are able to learn how to consciously guide their own progression, they can construct the world around them using their imaginative capacity while being guided by the image of their ideal future (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Principle 4: Research into the potential of organisations should be collaborative. The process of inquiry and the content one inquires into are inseparable from one another. Therefore, the AI facilitator/consultant must have a strong bond with the participants of the organisation. Researching the potential of organisations is a collaborative effort in which every participant has to contribute (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

2.3.2 The Method for Appreciative Inquiry

As all the foundational principles discussed above already indicate, there is no one-size-

fits-all approach for Appreciative Inquiry. Every process is different because every process happens in a different context and with different participants. The dimensions of Appreciative Inquiry, however, laid the basis for what would become *the* method for Appreciative Inquiry, the 4-D cycle.

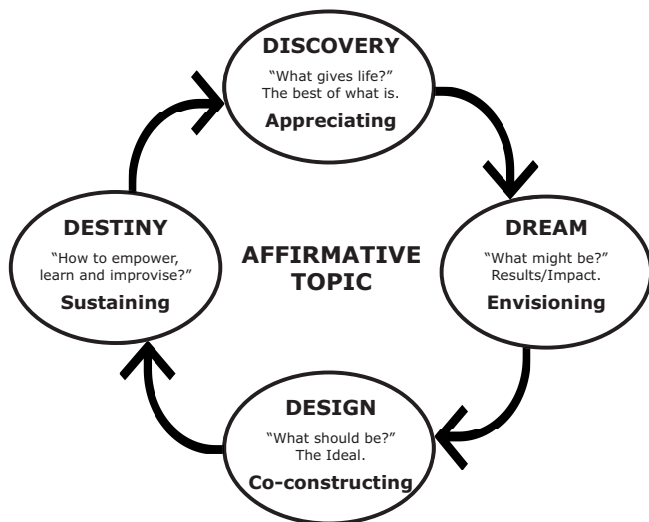


Figure 1. The 4-D Cycle

At the very centre of the 4D cycle is the *Affirmative Topic*, which will define the content and course of the process and everything around it. The affirmative topic determines the first question that is being asked, and therefore determines the focus of the process while setting the tone for all the other questions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997). It is of utmost importance to determine the affirmative topic with a focus on *what gives life*. The pitfall here is to avoid reversed problems as inquiry topics. Appreciative Inquiry draws its power in converting these problems to images of an ideal future (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

In the current deficit-based culture, it is oftentimes difficult for participants to come up with an affirmative topic from the get-go. Therefore, it is also possible to start from a

problem and reframe it towards an affirmative topic. An affirmative topic should (1) be affirmative, (2) express a desire, (3) connect the parties involved, (4) evoke curiosity and enthusiasm and (5) create perspective about the vision of the organisation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

Once the affirmative topic is defined, the 4-D cycle commences through conversation. The 4-D cycle consists of four stages, starting with *Discovery*, where the aim is to inquire into the positive core of the organisation. The second stage, *Dream*, provokes the participants to create an overarching vision that uncovers the full potential of the positive topic. The third stage, *Design*, is intended to build short-term ambition through provocative propositions that magnify the positive core and launch the participants in the direction of their newly formulated vision. During the last stage, *Destiny*, the participants are *forced* to construct realistic action-based proposals that enable them to realize that overarching vision (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012; Bushe, 2011).

Discovery

The discovery stage is all about reflecting on and inquiring into the best of what is. During this phase, participants inquire into the “life-giving properties” of the organisation in question, thereby uncovering the positive core and specific strengths that can be built upon (Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). The process of inquiry can be initiated using a variety of questions that often revolve around “best of” experiences of the participants. During this process, everyone is engaged and has to contribute. Both interviewer and interviewee partake in the experience to maximize engagement in the

act of inquiry itself (Bushe, 2011; Carter & Johnson, 1999). These stories about “*best of*” experiences have the potential to expose an organisation’s *DNA for success* or *building blocks of success*. This provides a confidence boost to all participants, creating an atmosphere of accomplishment and motivation, which reverberates throughout the entire process (Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

Dream

During the dream phase, organisations inquire into their desired future, imagining *what might be*. The idea is that by focusing on appreciating, people are drawn to life even more, becoming more emotional and curious. Appreciating acts as a source of inspiration that stimulates the mind to envision positive images about the organisation at its best. As thinking about success automatically leads to thinking about the future, this stage is about utilizing the empowering stories of the discovery phase to construct an overarching vision of the best possible future for the organisation. The strategic focus during the dream phase is often constructed by the following three elements: (1) a vision of a better world, (2) a powerful purpose and (3) a compelling statement of strategic intent. Through conversations about this overarching vision, organizations enable themselves to see images of their constructed utopian world (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

Design

Utilizing the powerful images of the dream phase, the participants now have to conceptualize this idea to actually be able to take part in the world as it is. It is up to the participant to establish concrete plans to

realize the desired organisational change, also called possibility or design statements (Mohr, McLean & Silbert, 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). During the design phase, participants determine where they want to be in a specifically determined period. What will the situation have to look like for us to be on the right track to realizing the desired organisational change? Using the overarching vision of the dream phase, the participants construct a clear and attractive view of the near future. This view has to be formulated in the present to be both exciting and attainable at the same time (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Bushe, 2011; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

Destiny

The initial fourth D, *Delivery*, was all about continuous learning, adjusting and improvising. The *delivery phase* represented a time of action and planning, developing strategies and implementing them. However, Cooperrider perceived *delivery* as too reminiscent of traditional change management processes and therefore, changed the fourth stage to *destiny*. This fourth stage is the source of much confusion in the AI community, as they feel that the idea behind it goes against the Appreciative Inquiry mindset. From the destiny phase to the design phase, energy levels seem to keep increasing, but actually implementing the formulated ideas turns out to be an entirely different ballgame. Nevertheless, the destiny phase encourages organisations to plot how they can realize their *design* vision. This stage focuses on setting up clear actions and creating projects. It indicates where to start and who has to be involved. Now, it’s time for action (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Bushe, 2011; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012).

2.3.3 Conditions & Success factors

Appreciative Inquiry is about more than merely focusing on the positive. In his 2007 article, Bushe stated that simply focusing on the positive and sharing stories of positive experiences does not guarantee that the Appreciative Inquiry process will be successful. Focusing on the positive can, however, be a mechanism to activate positive feelings that have the capacity to build and sustain momentum for change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997). Since there never really is a guarantee for success, Cooperrider took it upon himself to discover and analyse five unique factors that influence the success of the AI process. These conditions have to be present before initiating the Appreciative Inquiry process (Cooperrider, 2012).

Condition 1: Reversing the 80/20 principle

Before initiating an AI process, it is imperative to educate the leadership teams about the underlying principles of AI, which provides fundamental knowledge for reversing a strongly embedded deficit-based thinking within organisational cultures worldwide. *The questions we ask, define the world we live in, what we focus on, is what we will find.* Therefore, it is assumed that positive change can only commence by asking positive questions. Though there has been a lot of research about strength-based change, because of the “unfamiliarity” of this concept, understanding the logic behind it, and building the right thinking patterns to utilize it, is taught best by first-hand experiences (Cooperrider, 2012).

Condition 2: (P)reframing a powerful task

It is often said that focusing on the positive is easy when times are good, but how does one

focus on the positive when times are bad? One thing is certain, no matter the situation, AI processes done correctly always bring out the best in human systems. However, (p)reframing, or positively reframing a powerful task with an overarching purpose is imperative for the success of the process. AI summits are rarely initiated merely for the fun of it, there always seems to be a reason to change, whether it is positive or negative. As discussed above, the affirmative topic is one of the defining factors for the success of the process as it informs everyone effectively on what the process is about. The key question here should be focused on what the organisation wants to *create* and not what it wants to *avoid* (Cooperrider, 2012).

Condition 3: Focus on the whole

When thinking about Appreciative Inquiry, people often get blinded by the focus on positivity. Focusing only on the positive might create a shadow over emotions that are generally perceived as *negative*. As a result, these feelings can be neglected and suppressed during the AI process (Fitzgerald, Oliver, & Hoxsey, 2010). However, AI is not just about the positive (Bushe, 2007). AI is about the experience of wholeness that has the potential to draw out the best of humanity by thinking about strengths and whole configurations. Successful Appreciative Inquiry summits include the entire living system in question to participate in systems thinking, collective planning and designing in real-time. The key is to include all stakeholders to make sure that all sides of the story are covered. For genuine innovation to take place, stakeholders from all parties involved have to come together in a multidisciplinary group to share and explore each other's strengths (Cooperrider, 2012).

Condition 4: The art of design thinking

With the participation of the entire system in multidisciplinary groups, the importance of design thinking increases. Thinking like a designer means looking at the world through a positive lens. Because designing is too important to leave to designers alone, a collaborative effort of the organisation as a whole is necessary, as argued in the third condition for success. Design thinking is an absolute must to expose new innovative ideas. A successful AI summit combines dialogue with a focus on design thinking provoking positive behaviour and action on an organisational level (Cooperrider, 2012).

Condition 5: The concentration effect of strengths

Management practice is undergoing a shift from micro strengths to macro strengths, which means that managers today have to not only manage internal strengths but also focus on external strengths. The concentration effect of strengths, therefore, has to become a pivotal skill throughout the entire organisation so that the organisation can grow in size and productivity while building and maintaining a culture that fosters open innovation. During the AI summit, the concentration effect of strengths activates the collective energy in three phases. In the majority of cases, this effect can be felt when transitioning from the discovery and dream stage to the design stage (Cooperrider, 2012).

Phase 1: Elevation & Extension

During the first phase, the emphasis is on elevating strengths through inquiry and extending relationships within the organisation. As the AI philosophy strongly believes in the *power of early beginnings*, the

AI summit powerfully commences with creating new system configurations of the whole and extending the current relationships beyond their binding boundaries (Cooperrider, 2012).

Phase 2: Broaden & Build

The second phase broadens the current capacity while simultaneously building up a new one. As more people study strength-based change and come together by inquiring into the positive, they tend to experience a heightened feeling of positivity, which has the potential to broaden their thinking by opening up the mind and building a generative space (Cooperrider, 2012).

Phase 3: Establish & Eclipse

During the third and last phase, the large group connects to the positive core of the inquiry through establishing and eclipsing the positive change and innovation. As already stated, during positive strength-based processes problems should not have to be avoided or denied. As already mentioned in the first condition for success, there should, however, be an 80/20 balance between focusing on the positive and focusing on the *less positive* (Cooperrider, 2012).

2.4 Reflecting upon AI facilitators

As already mentioned, over the years, plenty of research has been conducted about Appreciative Inquiry. However, theories about the concept itself, the underlying principles, processes, methods and success conditions are no guarantee for the success of the Appreciative Inquiry process. Building further upon Bushe's request in 2011 to discover the

competencies required for the AI facilitator/consultant, this research expands the scope of that request.

Competency, in the purest definition of the word, is defined as a possession of sufficient skills, capabilities and knowledge to do a job well (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021; Vocabulary.com, 2021; Merriam-Webster, 2021). As already mentioned in 1987, Cooperrider and Srivastva imply that Appreciative Inquiry is more than just a tool that requires skills to be used effectively. Appreciative Inquiry is reflected in the way people live and think. Appreciative Inquiry is not something you use, but something you are. The AI facilitator/consultant acts as the gatekeeper for the success of the AI process. Therefore, focusing merely on his/her competencies does not suffice to discover what makes a successful practitioner so successful. This might also explain why so little research has been done about these AI competencies and why Bushe’s question remains to be answered. Because of the open-minded nature of this research, the intended scope expanded through the interviews with the facilitators, shifting the focus from reflecting on the competencies of an AI practitioner to reflecting on the deeper levels of an AI practitioner.

2.4.1 Levels of self-reflection

As suggested by Luc during one of the conducted interviews, to discover what makes an AI facilitator/consultant successful, it is imperative to reflect deeper than only the level of what a person can do. People are more than their capabilities and skills, people are more than what they know. People are a product of a variety of factors that have shaped them to become the person they are. The same approach applies to understanding the success of AI facilitators/consultants. Using the findings of Korthagen (2014) and Bateson (2004) there are seven levels of reflection when looking at the effectiveness of a person. Using what Korthagen calls “het ui-model”, or in English, “The Onion Model”, a person looking to discover the source of his/her success or failure can reflect upon him/herself on seven levels; (1) environment, (2) behaviour, (3) competencies, (4) beliefs, (5) identity, (6) mission, (7) core qualities. Oftentimes people tend to reflect on their *environment* and their *behaviour* in specific situations. In our current society, our focus is mostly devoted to the *competencies* that define this behaviour. The model broadens our view on competency-based thinking and urges us to also focus on the *beliefs* that determine our competencies, our own *identity* in a

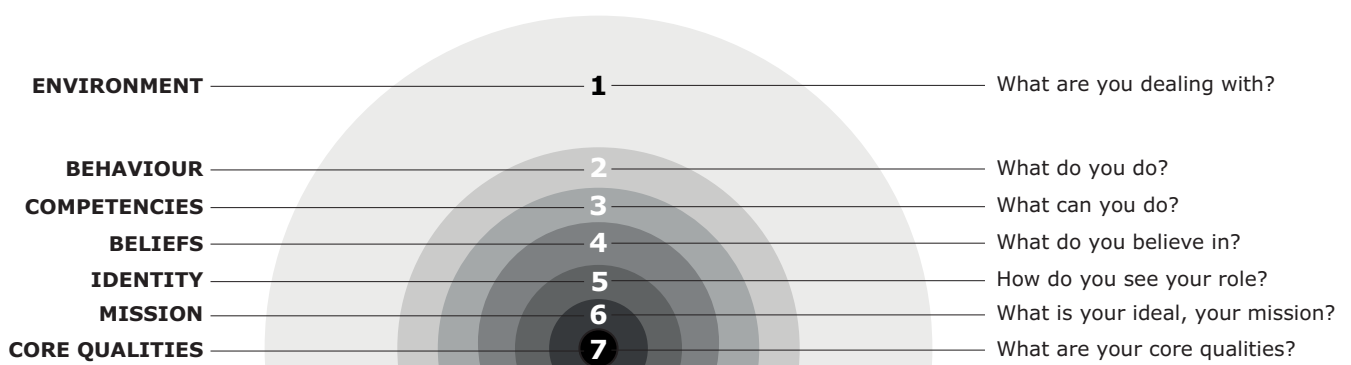


Figure 2. Korthagen’s (2014) Onion Model

personal or professional setting, and in the more spiritual layers of the model, the *mission* that transcends our identity and the *core qualities* that define us as a person. When all six personal layers are in perfect harmony with each other, a person can get into what Csikszentmihalyi (1999) calls *flow*. This is a state where a person feels like they belong exactly where they are. Everything you do in this *flow-state* is in harmony with who you are as a person and what is needed in that particular situation (Korthagen, 2005).

The initial intent for the onion model was to be used in an educational context when reflecting upon the performance of teachers. However, the philosophy behind the model resonates with reflection on performance in any setting. Therefore, the Onion Model served as an inspiration to perform a deeper reflection on the experiences and stories of the AI practitioners and ultimately discover what a successful AI practitioner is made of. The framework used to perform these reflections is a slightly modified version of the original Onion Model as introduced by Korthagen in 2014 and will be explained in part 4.2.1 of the findings section.

3. METHODOLOGY

Since the literature about the required competencies of the AI facilitator/consultant is scarce, finding relevant literature for this research proved to be a challenge. Bushe already indicated that at the time of writing his paper, in 2011, there was very little information available about the topic. It seems that the same can be said for 2020 - 2021. Therefore, this research has been conducted as a qualitative study that aims to answer the question; *How can Appreciative Inquiry be*

successfully used to facilitate organisational change from the perspective of the Appreciative Inquiry change facilitator? As this is a "how" question with an extensive nature, qualitative research enables us to get a deeper understanding of the experiences and stories of the participants. Because context, energy and emotion play an important role in storytelling, qualitative research allows us to explore human aspects that are near impossible to convert into analysable data when aiming to get a grasp on human experiences.

3.1 Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling is a way of collecting data, in which the choice of which data to collect is based on theories and categories that emerge from it. The process of collecting data, coding the data and analysing it happen simultaneously without a predefined chronological order. It is best used when looking for new theories based on data and can best be executed with a high degree of flexibility in both the methods you use and the timeline to use them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Theoretical sampling comes with a degree of openness towards what comes up during the research. If something interesting emerges, theoretical sampling allows the researcher to dive deeper into it. As this openness leans close to the idea behind the Appreciative Inquiry method, this research about AI has been conducted using an AI approach, which makes for an interesting dynamic. During the research, it was important to be open to whatever came up. Although writing a thesis already brings a lot of work, if something interesting arose, it had to be included in the research. I started with one email to an

experienced AI practitioner with a request to have a conversation about his practices, experiences and competencies. With an open mind and genuine interest, we conversed online for more than 90 minutes about a variety of topics. At the end of the conversation, the insight emerged that if AI relies on *being AI*, a practitioner is more than his/her competencies. His/her beliefs, values and personal mission also influence the process. Therefore, moving forward, the emphasis of this research shifted from *inquiring into competencies* to *inquiring into the practitioner* and whichever themes came up, have been discussed. Themes that did not come up, were not discussed.

After this initial conversation, the implicated AI practitioner provided me with 10 names and email addresses of other AI practitioners. At the start of the research, the initial intent was to interview 8 AI practitioners, however, to make sure that I collected enough data, another 2 interviews were added until some form of theoretical saturation was evident. To keep the sample as broad and interesting as possible, the only criteria of choice was that the practitioner was *experienced*, in a very subjective sense of the world. I ended up conversing with a sample of 10 AI practitioners for an average time of 80 minutes. The shortest interview lasted about 50 minutes and the longest interview lasted over 95 minutes. The practitioners have over 175 years of experience combined. The *least* experienced practitioner had 7 years of experience while the *most* experienced practitioner had over 27 years of experience. The average years of AI - experience of this sample comes down to 17,5 years. The conversations proved to be interesting, but most of all, of an energetic nature.

3.2 Participant Profiles

Annet van de Wetering: She has been working with AI since 2005. She has over 22 years of experience as a consultant and started her own consultancy firm 8 years ago. Her first AI training was situated in the UK after which she participated in an AI certified program in the USA as well. She guides organisations through change with an AI perspective. Her specialism is appreciative auditing where she guides organisations to transform their quality systems from control to opportunity for collective learning and growth.

Arno Vansichen: Arno started working with AI in 2005. In 2008, he followed the Appreciative Inquiry programme at the Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland after which he contributed to the development of *VuurWerk*, or "*FireWorks*" and the Flemish AI-Learning Networks. He started his professional career in HR. He has worked in the private sector with companies like V'lux, Kreon, Stebo and the multinational Siemens. He started multiple companies, the first of which is *Evenwicht*, where he still works as a self-employed coach, organisational advisor, and the second is *Zinspeling*. As a career coach, he coaches leaders in teams and organisations through their development, growth and change processes. He is a lecturer at PXL Hogeschool where he teaches construction students skills in communication, leadership, and teamwork.

Barbara van Kesteren: She graduated in 2012 as a social psychologist and went on to study intervention science which gave her the practical tools to learn about intervening and working together within organisations. After her studies, she started working as an AI practitioner at the Institute for Intervention

Science in Amsterdam and as a trainer at Utrecht University.

Cora Reijerse: She studied clinical psychology at the University of Amsterdam. She is a Change Consultant and coach in education and has a lot of experience with a variety of AI processes, ranging from large processes that undertook entire organisations to smaller, more intimate processes that focused on teams. She has been a member of the European AI Network since 2014.

Heike Aiello: She has been educated extensively in topics like deep democracy, coaching, facilitating and reading bodies. In 2006 she first discovered AI when two of her colleagues came back from an AI event in the USA. In 2007, she went to the WAIC conference in Orlando herself where she decided to focus on AI as well. Right now, she is an AI facilitator, coach, trainer and guest lecturer. Her expertise is mainly focused on coaching and developing leadership.

Herman Wittockx: He has an extensive diploma portfolio, with a degree in psychology, philosophy, psychoanalysis and a doctorate about organising mirrored in nature. He has worked as a researcher at the centre of organisation and personnel psychology at KU Leuven and as a consultant in the International Institute for Organisational and Social Development. He has more than 20 years of experience with AI and together with Suresh Srivastva, one of the founders of AI and a very close friend of his, he guided a vast array of processes internationally.

Joep C de Jong: He started using AI since 1994/1995. He has practised a variety of jobs in different companies, going from the

managing board of Syntegra to British Telecom, and always combining his experiences as an executive within a company with his role as an external consultant. At this point, he works as an advisor in multiple organisations, universities in the Netherlands and the USA and the David Cooperrider Center. Furthermore, he is the co-author of a widely used book about Appreciative Inquiry.

Koen Joly: He was a remedial educationalist working with adults with a disability. He is very active in the European Network of AI practitioners and has over 18 years of experience as a coach in change processes. Furthermore, he has over 10 years of experience as a senior consultant in large organisations.

Luc Verheijen: His first experience with AI was in 2002. He participated in an exchange program of Hasselt University and KU Leuven with the University of Cleveland where he met David Cooperrider for the first time. He has collaborated with Cooperrider and Ron Frye on numerous occasions, building an Appreciative Inquiry learning network in Belgium. He is a co-publisher of the International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry, the AI Practitioner.

Robbert Masselink: He is an organisational advisor, researcher and trainer that focuses mainly on strategy and marketing. His expertise is used in research, analysis, reporting and process development. He has been educated as a business manager in business administration, marketing and group and organisational development. Since he participated in the CIGO-program of 1994, Appreciative Inquiry has been a big part of his life. He researches, talks about and publishes content about AI regularly. Furthermore, he is

the author and co-author of widely used books about Appreciative Inquiry.

3.3 Interviews

Out of all interviews, 8 were conducted online via Google-Meet and 2 were conducted via a phone call. The initial intent was to use the predetermined interview guide as can be seen in appendix A. However, it quickly became clear that conversing about Appreciative Inquiry partly loses its energetic nature when attempting to steer the conversation in a fixed direction. Therefore, I let go of the idea that all the intended topics had to be discussed and adopted an open mindset to discuss whatever came up. This reasoning might not be suitable for many forms of scientific research, but when looking for what makes Appreciative Inquiry successful *from the perspective of the AI facilitator*, not inquiring into what comes up, and thus into what is important for the facilitators, would be unfair towards them and towards the integrity of this study. However, during most conversations, these topics came up naturally. The questions were in no way, shape or form forced into the interviews. They now served the role as a guideline only to use if a conversation would not provide information valuable for the research. Since every conversation proved to be valuable, the guideline was never strictly followed, allowing me to inquire into what truly matters for the facilitators.

With the idea that *method is the message*, these conversations unfolded in an Appreciative Inquiry-based way, as already mentioned above. If one wants to discover things about AI and truly understand the thoughts and behaviours of the practitioner, one must make sure they are in the right state of mind to express themselves as they would

during their own processes. Having appreciative conversations, focused on strengths, best experiences and inquiring into what gives life and energy, provided this research with valuable insights that are to be discussed in the findings section of the paper.

3.4 Data Collection & Analysis

As the method of theoretical sampling implies, data collection and data analysis happen simultaneously during the process. After each interview, I would take the time to re-watch the online conversation and summarize the answer to each question in the interview guide. To make sure that everything I wrote down was correct, I shared the files via email with the concerned participant, inviting them to correct and supplement the written answers if needed. This way, I am certain that the information used in this research is correctly interpreted. When new insights or new potentially interesting information came up during an interview, it always carried over to the next interview to make sure that no stone is left unturned. This way, topics that are rarely discussed in the current literature, like *preparation*, turned out to be very important, while other topics that current literature focuses on extensively, like the *4-D Cycle*, rarely came up. The conversations on which this paper is based acted as a gateway to the mind and heart of the participating AI practitioners.

Combining the protocols of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and interpretative research (Langley, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the data for this study was gathered using mostly in-depth interviews. The interviews took place between March 9, 2021, and April 9, 2021. Conducting the interviews during such a short period, allowed me to successfully implement

the insights and topics of one interview into the next. Eight of the interviews took place via Google-Meet as in-person meetings were not safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. The other two interviews were conducted via a phone call as the AI practitioners specifically requested. To make them feel as comfortable as possible, I expressed no resistance whatsoever to these requests. The Google-Meet based interviews had been recorded with the consent of the facilitators. The recordings were used to transcribe each of the interviews verbatim. As the remaining two interviews were not conducted via Google-Meet, no recording had been made of these conversations. Using the extensive notes made during the conversations, I conducted a general outline of these conversations and assured the approval of the facilitators. Both facilitators edited and corrected the shared notes to make sure that the insights could be used most valuably.

Coding Process

Part of the data analysis is the coding process, as suggested by Charmaz (1996). By coding the written down conversations, I was able to discover threads amongst the experiences and stories of the facilitators. As this research focuses on how Appreciative Inquiry can be used *successfully* to facilitate organisational change from the perspective of the AI change facilitator, with *successfully* being the keyword in this question, my focus was on the “best of” experiences rather than the criteria for failure. At the start of the coding process, the data was given an *initial code* that identified the main topic of each statement by describing the narrated happenings as can be seen in Table 1 which illustrates the entire process for a sample of text from the interview with Annet. She talks about how choosing the

right words can connect people. She explains that it is important to know the perspective of others. To be able to find any similarities or oppositions, a second code had been given to the data as well.

During the selective coding process, each initial code had been categorized into a broader topic. These topics were based on the context of the conversation, including the participants’ feelings and opinions. Annet talks about how everyone has a different perspective. She explains this using examples of a video and personal experiences. The larger theme of these statements has to do with how people see their own reality, which is why the selective code *Subjective Reality* has been given to most of the statements as depicted in Table 1. Let it be known that the chosen themes are a result of my interpretation, which is determined by my own experiences and beliefs on the world. After providing every interview with initial codes and selective codes, all the statements were combined in a large Google Sheets file. They were then categorized in terms of the second-order theme, as can be seen in Table 2, which illustrated a sample of the second-order theme *Subjective Reality*. Evidently, stories and shared experiences contain multiple elements. Therefore, all the statements that fell into one second-order theme were classified a third time to fit in a subtheme. Table 2 depicts how half of the statements about the subjective realities of the participants are more about the differences in perspective, while the other half refers to personal experiences. The same protocol has been applied to the summary notes of the phone call-based interviews. I continued to process the interviews in this manner until no large new topics emerged, which is what

Suddaby (2006) refers to as saturation. This implies that all the possible themes have been extracted from the texts. And thus, indicated that it was time to move to the next stage of the process.

Analysis

After finishing the database of themes, I looked for emerging patterns. When looking at Table 2, for example, it is clear that Annet has a lot to say about the subjective reality of people, she focuses strongly on the different perspectives of the people. However, it seems that Joep, Cora and Heike also agree with her idea of including people's perspectives. Furthermore, the findings indicate that Herman and Robert also focus on the subjective reality of people, but they talk more about what they experience. The fact that Annet, Cora, Joep, Heike, Herman and Robbert all express their opinion about subjective realities and indicate that this idea is a part of their process, implies that there is an importance to it. Bear in mind that Table 2 does not show all the statements about the topic, this is merely a small sample of the whole. Koen, Luc, Barbara and Arno also had their opinion about the topic.

This approach was used to analyse all the statements, codes and themes that eventually lead to the frameworks as can be seen in the findings section. With an Appreciative Inquiry approach, an open mind and curiosity, the simultaneous process of data collection and analysis slowly but surely showed some threads amongst the stories, experiences and knowledge. Paying extra attention to the more energetic conversation topics of each interview, it became clear what a successful facilitator actually thinks is important for the success of an AI process.

Due to the large scope of the initial research question, and due to the complexity of all the interconnected parts within an AI process, the findings and conclusion of this research consist of three large elements that determine the success of an AI change process; the participating organisation, the nature of the facilitator and the process architecture.

Table 1. Sample of the coding process

Annet talks about how using the right words connects people		
Selective Code	Initial Code	Translate Interview Statement
Subjective reality	Exploring others perspectives	<p>What's also very present in my processes is that you explore the perspectives of others. I saw a beautiful video today, it's called <i>fusion of horizons</i>. It is a German philosopher I believe and that is the kind of video that shows you that you only have a limited perspective from Earth. If you hover above it, you can see a bit more, but you have your own beam of light, your own little satellite, you only see a small portion of the entire globe, so to speak. You need contact with others that have their own satellite because together, they form a complete picture of reality. You should get those parts to create a shared understanding. This means that I should immerse myself in your point of view or the way you think about something. Furthermore, besides immersing myself, it requires me to leave my own point of view or my thoughts out of it and to see the differences or similarities between them. I think that is really important in appreciative research, knowing the perspective of the others, I think that's essential.</p>
Subjective reality	Video Fusion of horizons	
Subjective reality	You only have a limited view of the whole	
Connection Whole system	Creating a shared understanding of reality requires contact with others	
Personal approach	Immersing herself in others	
Subjective reality	Set aside own thoughts and opinions	
Subjective reality	Seeing similarities and differences	
Subjective reality	Subjective reality is essential in AI	

Table 2. Sample of second-order themes, subcategories and quotes

Themes	Participant	Quotes
SUBJECTIVE REALITY		
Different Perspectives		
	A.v.d.W.	<p>What's also very present in my processes is that you explore the perspectives of others.</p> <p>You only have a limited perspective from Earth. If you hover above it, you can see a bit more, but you have your own beam of light, your own little satellite, you only see a small portion of the entire globe, so to speak.</p> <p>You need contact with others that have their own satellite because together, they form a complete picture of reality.</p> <p>It requires me to leave my own point of view or my thoughts out of it and to see the differences or similarities between them.</p> <p>I think that is really important in appreciative research, knowing the perspective of the others, I think that's essential.</p> <p>With the principles it becomes more difficult, social constructionism is a beautiful principle, but it is also difficult. You have to recognize multiple realities. The way you see it, it is also possible that you read a story 5 times and understand something else 5 times. In the end, let that become a way of being.</p> <p>It is about their reality, their truth and their meaning to the situation.</p> <p>You are still yourself, but you give different nuances and that gives a different view or a different taste to change.</p>
	J.C.d.J.	
	C.R.	
	H.A.	
Personal Experiences		
	H.W.	A story about what one has experienced also brings back reality in organizations.
	C.R.	We restore trust to continue together. Therefore, you have to know how every person experienced the past. And then you also have to accept that that's different for everyone. Everyone has their own story.
	J.C.d.J.	We looked at the expertise, the possibilities and the potential of these people, of everyone who worked there, and how they could bring that into the AI process by sharing stories. We took that very seriously.
	R.M.	In my opinion, what matters more and more is that when people tell stories about themselves, about work, about each other or about teamwork, that they take their own experience seriously. You then start working with those personal subjective experiences.
		You take the experiences, the world and the value of the people more seriously. Then you see how relationships can develop and how they take shape.
		I continue to stick with the life stories of people because this is the opening for changes and renewal.

4. FINDINGS

As the AI facilitators recalled experiences about various processes they were a part of, they talked about their education, their work experiences, but most importantly they talked about their most memorable AI processes. They tell me about what they did during these processes and how they felt. They paint a perfect picture of what it would have been like to be there myself. These conversations were energetic where mutual interest was a noticeable factor. Each of the facilitators was enthusiastic about their story, their reality, which allowed me to feel the energy in the conversations and determine what is important for the success of an AI process and what might be more in the background. This allowed me to distinguish three frameworks that explain how an AI process can successfully facilitate organisational change; the first framework illustrates a general overview of all the factors that influence the outcome of the process, the second framework, which is a slightly altered version of the onion model, shows the personality layers of a successful AI practitioner and the

third framework show the general setup and important factors of the process architecture.

Figure 3 illustrates all the elements that have an impact on the success of an AI change process. It distinguishes four main themes that will be discussed in the following sections; the influence that the participating organisation has on the process, the influence that the facilitator has on the process, the bond between all parties, and the process architecture. These four themes are a result of the combined experiences and stories of all the facilitators. Figure 3 clarifies how each of the themes is connected to each other. The interpretation should be as follows;

Both the facilitator and the participating organisation influence the outcome of the process. The organisational influence depends on its leadership and its culture. The leadership sets the standard for the culture, so they must be on the same wavelength as the facilitator. On the other side, the facilitator cannot help but bring him/herself into the process, which is why his/her AI personality influences the outcome as well. However, all

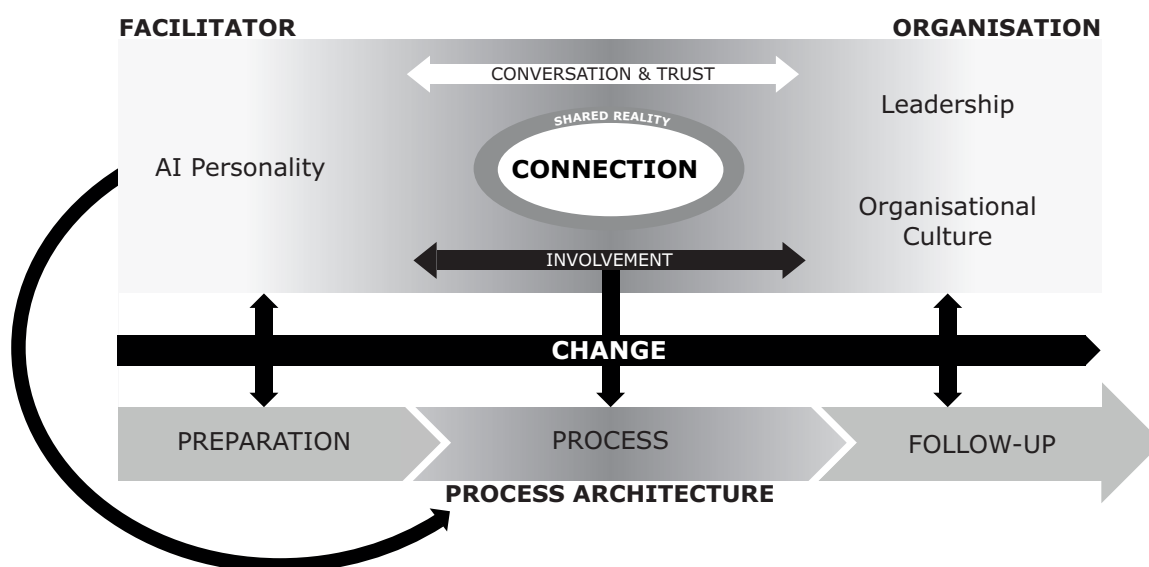


Figure 3. Overview of influences on the success of an AI process

parties cannot merely be considered individually in an AI process. The connection between the participants and the facilitator is crucial for the outcome. This connection comes from conversation and trust. The space in-between forms the shared reality that all parties are a part of during the process. All parties are involved in the process, which determines the changes that happen. Change happens from the moment of initiation and keeps happening until long after a successful process. The preparation stage is heavily monitored by the facilitator, the process itself is jointly created by both parties and the follow-up, putting the ideas into action, is mostly monitored by the organisation, but included in the preparation. Lastly, the craft of *facilitatorship* is in the design of the process, or the process architecture. The course of an AI process, evidently, influences its success.

4.1 Influence of the participating organisation

As already mentioned in the literature section about the *anticipatory principle* and the *conditions for success*, both the organisational culture and the leadership team can influence the outcome and success of an AI change process. Luc states "I absolutely think there is a correlation between the participating organisation and the success of the process, a correlation that has to do with culture and leadership in particular". Amongst the concerned facilitators, there is a universal agreement that indeed, these two factors have a major influence on the success of the AI process.

4.1.1 Organisational culture

Joep states that "the organisational culture is exactly what has to change, which can be very difficult". Heike adds that organisational cultures tend to be persistent. Joep further elaborates that "we are talking about the culture of an entire organisation. This culture has the potential to absorb the entire AI process, so I do think that the organisational culture has a large impact, but this can also be a positive thing".

This implies that the culture of an organisation does have a large impact on the success and the outcome of the change process. It is not evident to successfully change an entire culture that has been practised for a certain period within an organisation, especially since cultures tend to be persistent. Annet explains that in her experience, successful AI change processes were mostly realized in organisations with a learning attitude and with certain values: "I do think there is a thread here, oftentimes, it is organisations that want to be learning organisations. I also think that they should be consistent with certain values and during a certain developmental phase. It also very much depends on the way they handle things themselves." She further elaborates that it starts with "an organisation that is open to implementing a different approach".

In line with this open attitude, Barbara explains that "there has to be a willingness to talk to each other and to reflect with each other". Heike further elaborates that "because organisations are made of people and the relationships between them, it [the success of the process] very much depends on their willingness to roll up their sleeves and truly start changing things". She believes that "AI

is most successful in organisations when the people working there adopt an AI attitude". This willingness and open attitude have everything to do with "not *being forced* to change but *wanting* to change" according to Herman. Arno broadens this view on the matter by saying that "it is important that they believe in it [the process]".

Thus, the culture embedded within the participating organisations has a great impact on the success of the AI change process. However, this culture is not set in stone and can be changed only if the organisation is willing to work for it and wants it. They have to adopt an open attitude towards whatever comes their way and be willing to strengthen their relationship with each other.

4.1.2 Leadership

As the organisational culture heavily influences the outcome of the process, so do the leaders of the organisation. Joep is very devoted to the subject of leadership. He has been working on his PhD about "searching the soul of the appreciative leader", which sees every person as a leader of the largest existing project, our own lives in which our duty is to find the purpose of our own existence. He states that "the people at the top *have* the culture, they are responsible for setting the boundaries, to preserve and protect them. The leaders set the culture that influences everyone that works in the organization". However, as Arno points out: "Not all organisations are able to cope with the fact that the decision power has to be shared throughout the entire organisation". Therefore, it is imperative to educate the leadership teams about Appreciative Inquiry, to provide them with the necessary knowledge and get them in the right state of mind to

leave behind the common deficit-based thinking, as already mentioned in the first condition for success in the literature.

Following the willingness and openness of the organisational culture discussed in the previous section, Luc experiences that strong top-down leaderships with a planning and control approach are less likely to engage in an AI process. He states: "In my opinion, and I have not done any research about this, but as I experience it, a leadership that is fairly top-down and is more in favour of planning and control, will perhaps be less likely to engage in an Appreciative Inquiry process". Consequently, as Cora put it, "to guide an organisation or a team, you also have to guide the managers of the organisation or team". Herman specifies that "in an AI-driven process, it is important to support the management as well", with which Heike agrees. Heike further explains, "The management should be ahead. They should not be exposed to employees that know more than they do. That is why I often prepare a presentation for the management team and the HR team so that they can truly feel and understand what it [AI] is". Annet expands this thought by saying that "the leaders of the organisation are in a position that allows you to facilitate the process".

The real question when initiating an AI process and considering the influence of the organisation is, according to Herman, if the top of the organisation wants it. If they dare to engage in the process. If they trust their people. It is up to the management to answer the question "Do we dare to let go of the content, the what and the how at lower levels in our organization?"

These findings illustrate that although the organisational culture heavily influences the outcome of the AI change process, it all starts with the willingness of the leaders. They have to be in the right state of mind. They have to be willing to change. They are the ones that can change the organisational culture by setting boundaries and protecting them. This implies that there is a correlation between the success of the AI change process and the effectiveness of the facilitator's efforts to educate the leaders of the organisation about what AI is about.

4.2 Influence of the AI facilitator

If the participating organisation influences the outcome and the success of the AI change process, it is also valuable to explore to what extent the facilitator influences the process. Luc implies that "You always bring yourself into the process", Annet claims that her attitude influences what happens, and Barbara agrees by saying that "It is never neutral, you are who you are and things can go different because you might look into other things". Accordingly, Heike suggests that the facilitator embodies a certain approach. He/she carries a preference for certain methods and chooses what to elaborate on and what not during the process.

Herman asks the question "*Who is the best person to change you?*". He further elaborates "That's you. You are the best person to change you. Therefore, the role of the facilitator is limited. The relational network of the participants is at the centre of it all. The role of the facilitator is to stimulate collective development and keep on facilitating so that

this collective development can be translated into concrete change projects". This implies that for the change process to be effective, the facilitator can only do his/her part. The real change must occur from the participants, which resonates with the previous section in the findings. He further states that "A facilitator's personality and craft are crucial but mostly supportive".

Robbert agrees with Herman and states that the influence of the facilitator is indeed limited, but that there is a distinction between what he calls *on-stage* behaviour and *off-stage* behaviour: "When you are in an official gathering and you are working with groups, you have an agenda. In these moments, you have a large influence on the process. Your *off-stage* behaviour, which is happening outside of the official gatherings, has far less influence on the process". Heike expands: "I dare say that it [the behaviour of the facilitator] has a large influence, but at the same time, one cannot be indiscreet. In the large system, I am only a grain of sand, not even a grain of sand, I am an ice cube that has to watch out not to melt into the organisational culture. You only have a small effect to give".

On the other hand, some facilitators do believe that their influence on the success of the process is large. Barbara refers to the fact that "You never ask neutral questions and that is where it starts, the questions. I think the influence a facilitator has is quite large". Koen highlights the fact that sometimes, we tend to underestimate the influence of the facilitator on the success of the process, "I believe that it is *damn* important". Joep tends to agree with Koen and Barbara. He explains, "I can see that the person behind it [the process] is very important".

Opinions about this topic are slightly scattered but do seem to point in the same direction. Combining these perspectives, the findings hint that the facilitator does have an influence on the outcome of the process, albeit a limited influence. His/her influence is mostly concentrated during the *on-stage* moments in official gatherings when he/she stimulates and facilitates collective development. The magnitude of the facilitator's influence varies from facilitator to facilitator, relying greatly on their personal way of facilitating and what the process needs at that point in time. As every individual has their own personality, so does every facilitator. A facilitator's personal way of facilitating is determined by his/her AI personality, which derives from the model, as can be seen in Figure 4.

4.2.1. AI Personality

The first interview of this research was conducted with Luc. At the end of the conversation, he was asked about related topics that might be interesting to investigate during the search for what makes appreciative inquiry successful for realising organisational change, from the perspective of the AI change facilitator. Luc answers: "You've asked questions about competencies, and what I would also research is, I would include beliefs and values in that. I say that because I think that no matter your position, you can be a leader, a coach or a consultant, you always bring yourself into it. I think that every coach, every consultant, every leader should be aware of their own lens through which they see the world, their own assumptions and preferences, because you have them, everybody has them. From these assumptions, these values and preferences, our beliefs, we see the world around us. We see what we allow ourselves to see. But that

also means that we might not see the things that contradict ourselves and thus the importance of knowing our own assumptions and our own vision of the world, might be interesting when researching the approach and the power of success factors of an AI practitioner. If I were to be in your place, I would ask the people about the lens through which they see the world."

Luc later explained the *onion model* that Korthagen introduced in 2014 and which has been discussed in the last part of the literature study of this paper. As the philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry suggests, one must be open to appreciate whatever comes up. The fact that the *onion model* came up, validates its importance. As I inquired deeper into the minds of the facilitators, it became clear that the onion model in its original form did not quite fit the profile when considering the importance and emphasis on the discussed topics. To understand the facilitator's personal lens through which they see the world, the model has been altered to correctly indicate the important characteristics of a successful AI facilitator's AI personality. A *personality* is generally defined as "the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual's distinctive character" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2021) or "the type of person you are, shown by the way you behave, feel, and think" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). The AI personality, therefore, expands the competency-based view and gives us an understanding of the assumptions, values and preferences of successful and experienced facilitators.

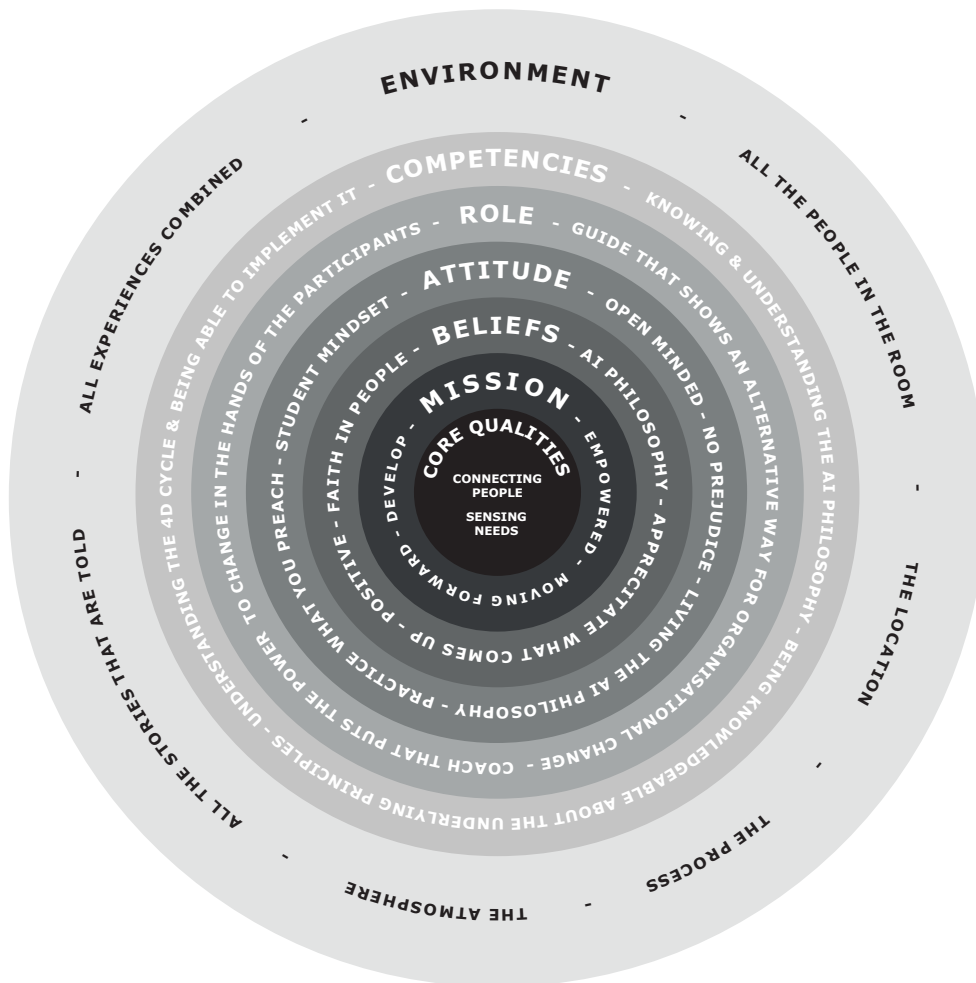


Figure 4. The AI personality of a successful AI facilitator

In the edited version of the Onion Model, it starts with the core qualities of the facilitator, which affect their mission or the reason why they choose to work from Appreciative Inquiry. Their mission influences what they believe in, what is important to them, which in its turn determines the way they act, their attitude during the process. Because of their attitude, they are able to fulfil a certain role, which *requires* a set of competencies and knowledge. The outer layer of the model, the environment, has nothing to do with the personality of the facilitator, but might influence the layers within.

I. Core Qualities

At the deepest level of the model, just like at the deepest level of a person, we can find the core qualities that identify who one is. The

facilitators were asked what they would identify to be the greatest personal strengths that they bring into the AI process, the *unique selling points* that distinguish them from others. Like with every personal question, a variety of answers come forward. However, two significant similarities are to be noted.

Annet, Cora, Heike, Robbert and Luc all reveal that they consider one of their greatest strengths to be their ability to connect people. Annet elaborates: "I can really connect people. I think people find this inspiring which makes them want to join me on this journey".

Cora states: "People always told me that I can get others talking. Connect people, really make that connection between people. Apparently, I'm very good at that". Heike expresses it as an ability to bind people: "I

think that one factor is my ability to bind people together, to ensure that no one is left out. I seem to have an eye for that". Koen states: "I think I can just create that connection, meeting each other, because they know that I manage to create that open and safe atmosphere quickly for people to be themselves". Robbert describes it as follows: "In one way or another, I succeed to understand what people are talking about and what the biggest differences are, which enables me to build bridges through connections". Luc talks about the power of connecting polarities: "I think it is a kind of polarity that I seem to successfully combine". He explains that he can simplify complexity for the participants, which makes them progress with each other.

The second thread that occurred, is that over half the participants point out *sensing what is needed* to be one of their greatest strengths. Koen explains: "I become really good when I'm able to drive on my intuition and when I just elaborate on what comes up, that is when I become great. It is a kind of intuition and creativity". Luc expresses: "My ability is to feel a team or an organisation quickly and understand where their apparent contradiction is, where they disable themselves. I help them surpass that and enable them to see the bigger picture once more". Cora specifies that she can feel where the pain points are located in an organisation: "I notice that I can pinpoint the pain point in a friendly and relaxed way because I'm not scared of conflicts". Heike expresses it more as the capacity to individualise: "I see everybody as they are and I know what they need, or at least, I feel like I know what that person needs, with regards to the tempo or giving them more intellectual input or action".

Annet recalls one of her successful processes and elaborates: "I think that what I did really well at that moment, is following the process and giving attention to the feelings".

Besides those two qualities, numerous other characteristics came up during the conversations. Every participant has his/her own core qualities that make them who they are. These qualities are at the base of their personality and thus also the way they facilitate since Barbara expressed that a lot of your personal style has to do with your personality. Other characteristics that seem to recur in various interviews were; empathy, passion, a positive mindset, enthusiasm, open-mindedness, team spirit, trust and diplomacy.

II. Mission

When looking at the mission of the facilitators, we try to get an understanding of their ideal and their values. We want to discover why they opt for an appreciative approach instead of a more traditional problem-solving method. Working from a traditional problem-solving approach can be very helpful to identify, analyse and diagnose problems, but as Cora states, that does not make people happy. Cora explains that she was used to this kind of approach, but that the appreciative approach changed everything for her. When working from an Appreciative Inquiry perspective to facilitate organisational change, people become more confident, which also energizes the facilitator. Something different happens when you address people on what they do good instead of what they do wrong. Cora reveals that once she started to focus more on a positive approach, she noticed that the results were better and that this approach proved to be effective.

Working from a problem-solving perspective often increases internal resistance within an organisation according to Herman. He elaborates that you can see the relief in people when they realise that change can be pleasant as well: "They discover that change is more about creativity and creating than it is about seeing an organisation as a problem to be solved". Working from a problem-solving perspective implies that the change facilitator coaches a problem instead of a solution, which results in having more knowledge about what goes wrong than about what should be, thus adopting an appreciative approach genuinely contributes to the change process. It is not because Appreciative Inquiry is not, what Robbert calls, an *evidence-based* approach that is not effective. On the contrary, since Appreciative Inquiry is an *experience-based* approach, it shifts the power to the organisation, following what Luc states, "The basic assumption is that you are the most important instrument in the change process".

Heike shares that when she first discovered Appreciative Inquiry, her first thought was: "This thing that is emerging right now, this is exactly what our world needs". Similarly, Joep states: "For a while there, I hoped that if everyone would simply understand the 4 D's and the 5 principles, we would live in a better world, I still believe that". Building further upon the findings of the interviews and previous statements, we can piece together the reason why these facilitators work from an Appreciative Inquiry approach instead of the traditional problem-solving methods, we can set up the mission that drives these facilitators; Appreciating what is good, makes us long for better, it makes us want to move towards an attractive future. Appreciating gives us energy and makes us enthusiastic, it

allows us to see the world as a source of potential and opportunities. It helps us to learn and develop together while clarifying where we want to end up. It helps us build stronger connections and gives us the language to move towards our shared perspective of the ideal future by using the qualities of people and organisations as leverage to realise the desired change.

III. Beliefs

If a facilitator always brings him/herself into the process, Luc indicated, he/she should be aware of his/her own belief and assumptions. We have already established that each person has his/her own subjective reality to be appreciated. This reality is partly constructed by the beliefs through which we see the world. When talking about beliefs, the obvious question is "what do you believe in?". Although the facilitators were not asked this specific question, during various moments within each interview, they expressed their beliefs in a variety of ways. In this section, we explore the parallels between beliefs that came out of these findings.

Cora and Koen explicitly state that there is always something positive. They truly believe that even though things might be going bad at the moment, there is always something positive. Koen talks about his experiences as an AI facilitator: "I have never gone the wrong way. Never. I have gone a completely different way than I initially imagined many times, but there has never been a wrong way". He implies that to the core of his beliefs, he truly trusts that whatever way the process is going, is the right way. There is no right or wrong way according to Koen, there is only what is. Cora also states that there are always problems, you can't see things in black or

white, whatever is happening, there is always something good.

In line with this, Barbara and Robbert express their feelings about being open-minded. If there is no right or wrong, one has to be open to whatever there is. Robbert states: "I believe that you need a level of openness. I call it being open, being truly open to accepting the differences of others, you allow yourself to be changed as well, you allow yourself to be touched". Barbara adds to this: "Being open-minded works wonders. Not judging from the get-go". She further elaborates: "It is in being able to accept people as they are and being able to accept yourself". Cora strongly relates to this belief, stating that she always starts with accepting everyone, however he or she might act: "I believe that everyone has their reasons to do what they do, otherwise they wouldn't do it". From her perspective as a psychologist, Barbara explains that everyone has good sides and bad sides: "Seeing that entire picture and also being able to accept that every person has a shadow side, I think that is really important". Koen calls it an openness, safeness, unprejudiced, a feeling that everyone is welcome". He further states: "I believe in the element of spontaneity, the creative, the common things, I believe in what happens and what people do".

Joep talks about the process at the telecommunications company where he was assigned the job of fixing, selling or killing the unit: "I don't believe in the easy road so I wasn't a fan of selling it. I don't believe in *to kill something* at all, I believe in life and yes, death is a part of that, but killing something on purpose... I always think to myself, as long as something moves and it is necessary, I just can't do that". So, he chose the third option,

the hard road, he chose to fix the unit, which he was able to do successfully. This illustrates how our beliefs influence our behaviour. Joep believes in life, he believes that everything that moves has a purpose, so in line with this belief, he chose the actions that support that. Although he chose the difficult road, he succeeded, because what he did was in line with what he believed.

One important parallel in the beliefs of the facilitators is that AI is more than just a method. To a certain extent, it influences who you are, it is a part of how you see the world. It has been expressed numerous times that a successful facilitator believes in the AI philosophy on a fundamental level. A facilitator should not only know the principles but live them. To live these principles, they have to resonate with your personal beliefs.

The participants were asked about their opinion about Murrell's (2005) statement that any healthy and spiritually grounded individual with a positive attitude can successfully facilitate an AI process. Most of the participants agreed with this statement to a certain extent. Herman agrees completely with this statement. Barbara adds: "I think that is beautiful, it would mean that almost anyone could do it. I do think that's true. It is very open. I think that David Cooperrider also stated that this is only how he envisioned it, but that everyone is free to do whatever they want with it". Cora also agrees that this is a good foundation to start working from AI. Heike feels like this is a way to provoke the facilitators to reflect on their own actions: "If AI truly is that intuitive, then anyone that looks at an AI website, that can read and gets a kind of feeling for it, would be able to do something with it". Annet extends the

statement, saying that "A healthy mindset, I get that in a sense that when you have positive energy and you're open to people, you have compassion for what others say and do, well if you have all that, you can work with everybody. So, in that sense, that is where the essence lies of what is possible".

Koen explains that if he were to make such a statement, he would reframe it: "Anyone that believes that people can do it themselves, would be able to guide such a process" because to Koen, that is the core of AI, it has less to do with him and more to do with his belief in others. Luc also has his own adjustments to make: "No I don't believe that is true, it's only logic, not every positive minded person can guide an AI process, but every person that guides an AI process has to be positive to a certain extent. I would look at it logically, I would want to reverse that statement. I think that, once again, no, not every positive person can guide an AI process, I don't believe that because to me there is also an element of craftsmanship in it. Reversely, I do believe that you cannot practice this AI craftsmanship if you don't embody AI a bit. You can't do AI without being AI". When asking the question of how AI can be successfully used to facilitate organisational change from the perspective of the AI change facilitator, it is imperative to know what Appreciative Inquiry means to the facilitator. If the idea of AI was intended to become a way of life, a philosophy and not just a technique or strategy to use when things are going bad (Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997), how does this then relate to the beliefs of a successful AI facilitator?

Herman distinguishes between working with AI as a tool and working from AI as a

philosophy: "If the facilitator sees Appreciative Inquiry as a philosophy of life, if he/she lives AI and works *from* AI, not *with* AI, a lot more comes with it. And since AI is a philosophy of life, it is a very idiosyncratic happening". Koen confirms the idea, saying that "AI is not a method, it is not a trick, it is not a checklist with steps to follow like with other effective approaches". Koen further elaborates, "When I discovered AI, it was like finding a tailor-made jacket, a perfect fit. I feel like I have been doing it all my life, but that AI gave me a methodology, a language. I really recognized myself in it".

Heike puts it like this: "I feel like you embody AI. We learn most from the way you are as a person". Luc agrees by simply saying that "you cannot *do* AI without being AI". And in one of his stories, Joep mentioned that an overseas company would pay to get him there to facilitate a process for them simply because they wanted him there in person as "he *is* AI". He states: "I have developed AI as a philosophy of life for myself, it is in my genes". Barbara, for example, claims "I am inclined to think that it is more than just a process, but I am also hesitant to make it more than it is because I feel it is also important to stay close to yourself". Furthermore, she states that "It happens more often in the world of AI that people are talking about an appreciative attitude, which means that you not only *act* appreciative but that you *are* appreciative. I think that is important as well". Cora declares: "I have always been a pure optimist in life. That resonates greatly with AI. I can see myself in AI".

Annet weighs in on the matter adding "I see it more as a vision, but I don't always handle it as a vision for life, but you could very well look

at it that way". Robbert sees AI as "a way of thinking, a narrative way of communicating and conversing with each other that helps you to get to a different level of relationships, interaction and teamwork, which is impossible from a problem-based approach with functional language".

In summary, when talking about the beliefs of a successful facilitator, it must be noted that every person is different and each of us has his/her own beliefs. What stands out is that each of the facilitators does have a strong belief in people. They genuinely believe that there is always something positive, they genuinely believe that you have to appreciate what comes up, even before you judge, and they fundamentally agree with the philosophy and principles behind Appreciative Inquiry. In one way or another, each of the facilitators expresses that AI is indeed not just a method or a technique. Facilitators like Herman, Koen, Heike, Luc and Joep go as far as saying that the facilitator is AI. The statements of Arno, Barbara, Cora, Annet and Robbert resonate with that same thought but are expressed more gently. This implies that a successful facilitator is one that fundamentally agrees with the AI philosophy, but that it does not completely define him/her as a person. It is important not to lose your own identity. The AI philosophy should be a part of the facilitator's way of life, the way he/she looks at and approaches it, while still being close to their own personality.

IV. Attitude

If the facilitators indicate that believing in the AI philosophy is important for the success of the process, and if one's beliefs dictate one's attitude and behaviour, it should come as no surprise that most of the facilitators talked

about having an *AI attitude* during their processes, meaning that they are one with the philosophy and try to live the underlying principles to the best of their abilities. For some, this attitude is just who they are in life, others have to be extra conscious to adopt this behaviour during the process. Koen reveals that no matter where he is, or what role he fulfils, he always stays the same: "You always get the same Koen, and to me, that is essential, there is no separation, it's always the same person". Herman fundamentally agrees with this idea, stating that there is no difference in behaviour before, during and after the process: "To be successful from AI in your work, you have to be one with the philosophy, you have to live it, you have to work *from* AI, not *with* AI".

However, this is not the same for everyone, Barbara explains that always being one with AI is a bit too much for her: "I think that doing it everywhere and always goes a bit far. I don't believe that's possible, you also have a family and a home. That's where it becomes harder, to always have an appreciative attitude at home". Once again, this proves that the attitude of the facilitator is very dependent on his/her personality. For some, AI feels like it is in everything they do, to others it is more related to their work. However, the facilitators do agree that the attitude of the AI change facilitator has an impact on the outcome of the process. It is in the way he/she walks around, the way they bring the process. Luc elaborates: "We can say that most of us have learned the same things about AI and we all know the same principles, of course, we do, but it differs in the way you form relationships and the way I form relationships. The things I focus on are different from the things you focus on". He

further elaborates: "You can fill up your toolbox with theories and models, and AI might be one of them, but it is the way you bring it that defines it, with your own assumptions, your own values, your own beliefs, your own strengths and your own weaknesses."

If having an AI attitude requires you to be open-minded, adopting a learning attitude is the next step. Annet, Heike, Herman, Cora, Koen and Robbert all indicated that an important part of their attitude is to keep learning new things, to adopt a student mindset. Annet elaborates: "A learning attitude, to keep learning, I really like that, but I also think it's a must. I attribute part of my success to my learning attitude". Heike expresses that she strongly emphasizes continuous learning while staying humble. From his academic background, Herman states that part of being human is growth and development, "People are continuously learning", he says.

As with everything else, every person has his/her personal methods of learning and gaining knowledge. Koen, for example, likes to talk with people about books they read, instead of reading those books himself: "People tell me what the book is about, and I truly find it wonderful to converse about that, but I don't necessarily have to have read those books myself". Herman is convinced that one of the best ways to learn and develop is to do it with a playful approach, "Learning happens from the outside to the inside", he states. This learning attitude also reflects itself during the process. It is a part of having an open mind. If something new pops up during a process, a facilitator with a learning attitude will want to know everything about it

and try to gain knowledge from whatever he/she can.

If one encounters novelties during the processes one guides, one has to also be brave enough to reflect on one's own doing and thinking. Robbert explains: "Exactly because you are consistently looking at your personal experiences, by reflecting on your own feelings, you can examine your feelings during these change processes". He goes on: "While you're working, you can regularly ask yourself questions like 'what am I doing?', 'why am I doing this?' or 'why am I thinking this?'". He explains that sometimes you will encounter something that contradicts your values or goals. At that moment you have two options; (1) you avoid it and never look at it again or (2) you ask yourself why that is and what is going on.

This AI attitude of successful facilitators has some overarching parallels that originate from its philosophy. It is about appreciating what comes up, even before you judge, which requires an open mind that is free from prejudice. A crucial part of this AI attitude is that the facilitator agrees with, and to a certain extent embodies the underlying principles of AI, meaning that he/she is aware of them and incorporates them in their behaviour when it comes to facilitating the process. Another essential idea within the AI attitude is that negativity is acceptable. If one is to appreciate everything that comes up, one also appreciates the negative feelings and experiences. Even though negativity comes up, the AI philosophy induces the idea that there is always something positive, one only has to look for it. Lastly, being open to learn new things and reflect upon your own behaviour constitutes the foundation of

continual improvement, which is imperative to set the right example for the participants.

V. Role

Reflecting upon the role of the facilitators means that we have a deeper look into how they see themselves. Since we are inquiring into their role as a facilitator, the reflection will be aimed at the way they see themselves as an AI practitioner, looking at their professional role. Herman expresses that you cannot just take up a certain role and start: "As a facilitator, you can't just get in and out and take up a certain role. To express it metaphorically; It's difficult to board a flying plane, and changing the pilot along the way is not a good idea". This implies that a facilitator's role, as we have already established, influences the process. The mantle you pick up is specific to you and is not easy to replace once the process has started. The bond between the facilitator and the participants is not easily interchangeable.

Koen expresses his thoughts on the matter: "I think my role is mostly to show them that they actually don't need me, to show them that they can do it all". Following his beliefs, he wants to get out of there as quickly as possible, he explains: "I love designing and guiding processes and one of the questions I ask is 'what role would Koen still be able to play in this process?' but it is not my guidance that we're creating, we're creating the process that they need to find an answer to their questions. Who knows I might still have a role in that process, and if not, no hard feelings, actually, even better, I truly believe in that kind of empowerment of the people". To Koen, his role is merely to guide the process of the participant, to show them that they don't

really need him, to show them how capable they are.

Luc experiences this a bit differently: "It doesn't matter how you look at it, or how you positioned yourself in the introduction, you always have a certain role and if you walk around and join one of the tables, instantly something changes, often this is something implicit in the power dynamics. People get the feeling that they have to perform or say the right things, just because you are there. The self-managing team that they jointly created during the first 15 minutes all of a sudden disappears because you joined them, and they assume that you will take matters into your own hands and lead them." It is because of this, that Luc prefers to keep himself involved but from a distance. Cora resonates with this, stating that her influence is fairly large because she gives a lot of authority to the participants.

During the process, the AI change facilitator is a guide and a coach. The facilitator steers the participants into the direction they want to go in while coaching them to extract the best experiences and characteristics. The facilitator is a chaperone that shows the participant a different way of realizing their goals. He/she is a counsellor that gives and receives full confidence in the group and in some cases, the facilitator is a friend. In other cases, his/her professional role takes the upper hand as a consultant. A facilitator's role is like a chameleon, he/she adapts according to the process and the stakeholders, while his/her personal identity is impregnable. A successful AI facilitator will always stay close to his/her personal beliefs and integrity.

VI. Competencies

As Luc put it: “people are more than their competencies and skills”. In our current society, we tend to reflect, almost exclusively, on the level of what we can do and what we know. However, most of what we can do and what we know is a product of our beliefs, of who we are, our vision of the world. Annet, Heike, Herman, Koen and Luc completely agree. When asked for her opinion about what competencies are, Annet states: “Actually, I seldomly use that word, so I can’t say much about it, maybe that already says a lot”. Herman simply declares: “The focus should not be on the competencies of an AI-facilitator. What really matters is the attitude, the way you can work together on a theme”. Koen completely agrees with this reasoning, implying that you can have competency without passion.

All the facilitators agree that the word competency is about something you’re good at, it can be about skills, it can be about knowledge, it can be about capabilities. However, competency is not necessarily something that you possess naturally, in contrast with a talent. Luc explains: “A competency is a learned ability. Competencies are things that I do not possess naturally or things I’m not naturally good at, but with practice and devoting energy to it, I learned to do it”. Annet clarifies that talking about competencies only includes the third level of the Onion Model, as shown before.

Competencies of an AI facilitator

Since the facilitators unanimously agreed that competencies are far from the most important factor when it comes to the success of the AI process, the results for this question remain scarce. However, when *forced* into a position

to come up with some important competencies, the answers are very similar to their personal approach and style of facilitating. Competencies like being able to communicate and being sensitive to the words you use, came up. Koen mentioned that being able to cope with uncertainty might be an important competency for him. He also stated that it is important for a facilitator to be able to turn off his/her ego and realise that it is not about him/her. Heike and Cora both mentioned that a facilitator should be able to look at things in a positive light. Annet and Joep were very fixated on the more humane aspects of the process like being able to surpass your own judgement and express compassion and empathy. Robbert explained that being able to reflect on your own thoughts and feelings is an important competency. Luc claims that in the design of the process, preparation is an important competency.

Nonetheless, when looking at the variety of what is mentioned, we can point out that these so-called competencies have more to do with the way the facilitators think about themselves and about the process. These competencies very much relate to their mindset, their own attitude and what seems to be important to them. Taking this into account, we can suggest that it would be advisable for a facilitator to not focus too much on what they can do, but on what they like to do, what they are good at and enjoy being good at and use these so-called competencies to establish their own approach and style while implementing the foundational AI behaviours mentioned in the previous section.

Required knowledge

Part of what we can do is what we know. Therefore, we further elaborate on what is required for an AI facilitator to know in order to guide an AI summit successfully. Like in the very beginning of the findings section, it comes down to the way a facilitator sees AI. Herman expresses: "If the facilitator sees AI as a tool to work with to guide change processes, then a course about the 4-D cycle is a good start". Annet adds that: "If you see AI as only the 4-D method, well then indeed you have to know something about the steps, then you don't really have a choice". As we established, these facilitators all see AI as something more than a method or a technique. Starting from this perspective, what is required of the AI facilitator to know? Joep explains it using a metaphor about his own life, in which he likes to dance and sing: "You have to know something about the technique. If I want to dance the Tango, well then I have to know the basic steps". He further elaborates: "Someone that claims to be an AI practitioner, that does not have a fundamental understanding about AI, about the principles, with these people, I am very doubtful, then simply *being* AI is not enough. It is like performing a beautiful piece of music, you have to be able to handle the instrument, you have to understand what is happening. In that sense, I might be a bit of a purist. Meanwhile, if you know these, if you have a base to work with, then you can start playing with it, you can mix it up, you can listen, but this is only possible if you have that base".

Annet, Barbara, Koen and Joep express their feelings about the 4-D cycle. Joep starts off, stating: "Everybody can learn the 4-D cycle. It doesn't matter who you are or how you look at life". Barbara and Koen explain that you can

use the 4-D as a framework to start from. Barbara explains: "sometimes you can just follow it to a tee", Koen elaborates: "The 4 Ds are always in the back of my mind and I think that almost every process I do can be placed inside this model". Annet also has her take on the matter: "I always have the 4 Ds in the back of my mind and sometimes I explicitly use the steps depending on what the process needs". These findings indicate that being knowledgeable about the 4-D cycle is useful to help the facilitator understand what the process is about, but it also gives him/her a point of reference for what to do during the process. How he/she fills in each of the four phases remains to be seen according to what the process needs at that moment.

The successful facilitator expresses more interest in the underlying principles of AI, which have also been discussed in the literature review. Joep states: "These principles are really important to me and I'm very happy to see a shift in importance from the 4 Ds to the principles". Barbara elaborates that the principles are always present during her processes, but they are not in the spotlight. Annet, Heike and Koen agree, saying that they will never call them by their name, they will never explain the theory behind them. Koen states: "You'll never hear me explain them. I do think that might be a difference between me and the others. I will seldomly explain why I do things a certain way". He further elaborates, "I just act on these principles". That seems to be the thread when talking about the principles. Robbert specifies, "I think I just internalised the majority of these principles over the years". The others are all on the same page about this. It is about living these principles, not necessarily about knowing and explaining

them. However, if one is to live these principles, one must know them as well.

Herman states that "Knowledge is creating". Annet explains that "If one knows more, one is also more aware of things". She further illustrates: "At the moment I know how something works, I can implement it more aware and therefore facilitate the process more aware. That just might be the difference between having knowledge and having no knowledge". This suggests that for a facilitator to know what he/she is doing during the process, it is important to be knowledgeable about AI in general. If knowledge is creation, then to create a successful process, to create a shared vision for the future with the participants, you must possess a certain degree of knowledge about the basics as well.

The facilitators further explain their specific expertise that derived from their education and experiences. During an AI process, it might always come in handy to have a bit of knowledge about positive psychology, conflict situations and how to resolve them, group dynamics and communication and about the participating organisation. The most important factor here is not to have this knowledge, but to be able to use it, if that is what the process calls for at that moment. Being able to hold the space and tailor your approach will almost always be superior to knowledge.

VII. Environment

When looking at the broadest level, the environment, one has to ask the question 'what am I dealing with?'. It is about what happens around the facilitator, things that are mainly out of his/her *circle of influence*, as Stephen R. Covey (2004) calls it. The outer,

and the most superficial layer of the model includes the life experiences of the facilitator and the people around him/her. Since this research is about how Appreciative Inquiry can be successfully used to facilitate organisational change from the perspective of the Appreciative Inquiry change facilitator, the surroundings that constitute the context of this reflection are the processes these facilitators have been talking about, the participants of these processes and in some cases, their fellow facilitators that supported or lead them during the processes.

4.3 Connection, trust and involvement

When talking about Appreciative Inquiry, all the facilitators unanimously agreed that connection is a very important success factor for the process. The following aspects will be considered during this section; the connection to and involvement with the process, the connection between the participants and the facilitator and the connection amongst the participants. We will inquire into how these connections can unfold and why they are important. Herman expresses that connection is the central word in AI. Koen states, "To me, connecting is very important, I strongly believe in connections". As already mentioned, it all starts with an open attitude and mind of the participants. Robbert recalls a process he facilitated in a police force where the participants were *forced* to be involved, which did not lead to great success: "A few years later, I did a large project with a police force. During this process, the involvement was imposed by the leaders of the force, and we really suffered from that". He further elaborates that in his other processes he

specifically asked the participants to be involved voluntarily, so there was no obligation: "Because it was not obligated to be involved, it was a bit harder in the beginning, but we benefited enormously from that later on". Annet talks about the first AI process she guided and illustrates a similar thought: "I explicitly asked them for commitment, commitment to research it [the topic] differently". Likewise, Koen expresses: "I'm not going to tell those people that they *have* to come". This implies that for connection, in any shape or form, to take place, the organisation must allow it.

4.3.1 Interconnection

If everything starts with the openness and willingness of the organisation to change, the next step would be to have a facilitator that is connected to the process as well. It has been established that the facilitator has an influence on the outcome of the process, and this influence starts with his/her connection to the process. Luc states "I am connected to the process, I am alert to see what happens, I make it so that if there are any questions, they can come to me, and I will always be available". Barbara agrees by saying that she prepares the process thoroughly, which enables her to be entirely present during the process. This also applies to Annet, who specifies: "the only thing I am very aware of is that I want to be very attentive and truly present". Heike adds that she "wants to be present with all senses". These findings illustrate the importance of the connection between the facilitator and the process itself, clarifying that awareness and being present is what makes the difference.

Furthermore, as principle 4 in section 2.3.1 in the literature review already stated, it is

imperative for the facilitator to have a strong bond with the participants of the process. Heike elaborates this by saying that "Somewhere in the process it helps if there is a connection, I prefer to have that as early as possible". Herman highlights the importance of investing in relationships claiming that "the connection between the different parties is crucial, the relationship that the facilitator engages with the people, what we do together, is essential". Both perspectives emphasize that there must be a connection between the participants and the facilitator while implying that the sooner this connection takes place during the process, the better.

This connection is not only crucial for the process to unfold successfully, it is also about how the people involved feel towards each other. Annet states that "the people in the room can feel if you are genuinely there to learn and create something together with them", implying that integrity and authenticity play a role in the genuine connection between the parties. Barbara also claims that "it is about how you feel a connection with someone". For Koen, it goes even further than that. He talks about partnerships, not relationships, recalling that some of his clients have even become close friends: "I also think it is important to feel connected, to me that is very normal. I have even called it a partnership, that we truly feel it [the process] is ours. The connection with the management or the team coach, I want to feel that they don't put me in this 'one-up' position, because I don't believe in that. I just came here to guide the process. I want the people to feel that I am just one of them. Meanwhile, a lot of my clients have even become friends of mine, true friends." This genuine connection between the facilitator and the participants is

crucial for the successful usage of AI to facilitate organisational change. Some, like Heike, talk about chemistry, others talk about dynamics, partnerships or even friendships, but the bottom line is that there must be a genuine connection.

4.3.2 Trust

Mutual trust & conversation

The foundation for this crucial connection during the AI process can be found in *trust*. Once again it starts with the organisation's willingness to place their trust in the facilitator. Koen talks about what he needs to feel during a process to feel strong: "What I really like is that level of trust, that baseline, feeling that they are comfortable because they trust that I know what I'm doing. I have to feel at home. I have to feel like I can do my thing without having to explain myself, I have to feel that I get the space to do what I want."

Barbara recalls a similar experience where a manager gave her complete freedom to do what she felt was necessary. She explains that the key to getting to this level of trust was *conversation*: "What stood out to me was that the manager said right before the process that I should do whatever I thought the process needed, they would arrange it and just follow me. To me, that indicated that he had a lot of faith in me, even if they did not know what we were going to do. That was extraordinary to me. I think this was the result of having some conversations with that same manager in advance." She further explains that "If you learn to communicate better, you get to know each other better. It is about getting into conversations about what is important to them". She sometimes facilitates this conversation through appreciative interviews.

The other facilitators tend to agree with Barbara's claim that conversations are the way to build trust. Cora initiates this trust by putting together two participants that are not very familiar with each other to talk about their experiences: "I let them talk about it [their experiences] in pairs. We explicitly chose people that were not very familiar with one another. When they came back to the rest of the group, I let them talk about how they experienced it. Everybody immediately found this interesting and important. They got to hear things that they did not know about each other, which enabled us to restore the mutual connection. I truly think that this is necessary". She extends her explanation with an example of a conflict situation between two teachers in a school: "I let them take turns to tell their story while the other one listens. They are not allowed to interrupt each other, which can be quite difficult when two women are fighting. My role during this exercise is to be the referee. This way people start to talk, others listen, and as a result misunderstandings or things that bother them come up. If you talk about these things for long enough, something always happens. In this particular situation, it ended very nicely." Robbert starts with the emotion in mind: "The emotion is actually the starting point upon which people can initiate conversations with each other". One of the exercises that Koen likes to do is to scatter pictures across the room, pictures with a poem, a quote or something inspiring written on them: "You can see that when people walk around the room, these small conversations start to happen. This is very important to me in everything I do". Joep puts it as simply as this: "It is about truly listening to the stories of the people". He talks about generating trust through these stories within a safe environment: "Of course,

as a leader you are responsible to see the boundaries, to set them and guard them. Inside these boundaries, as long as you're convinced that the story is good, that the story is right, that the story fits with everyone, go ahead. I believe in you, and I trust you."

These findings demonstrate that each of the facilitators is looking to generate a certain level of mutual trust with the participants to ultimately be truly interconnected. They all use conversations to initiate the first spark. However, the way they trigger these conversations varies from facilitator to facilitator. This will be further elaborated on in the latter sections of the findings.

Trusting the process & confidence

As an AI facilitator, it is important to be confident about yourself and the process. Heike talks about herself as being confident in her role as an AI practitioner: "As an AI practitioner, you can be confident in yourself". Her trust in the effectiveness of the process is so high that she can stay calm at all times: "My pulse does not even increase one beat [during the process], I am completely calm because I know that the process works".

For Koen, it goes even further, he talks about being confident in himself, but mostly being confident in the abilities of the participants. Although he gains confidence because of his trust in the process, he is also very aware that to truly trust the process, you have to be able to cope with uncertainty: "It is about trusting yourself, but mostly about trusting that the participants can do it. I do feel strong [during the process] because I know that what I'm doing, will work. I believe that what I'm doing at that moment, is what is useful and needed. But it comes back to trusting the process and

if you really want to trust in what happens, and you want to focus on that, then you have to be able to handle when for example you have a nice day planned, that it could very well go in a completely different direction, that you misjudged what would happen. You have to be able to cope with this uncertainty". He further explains: "Even if you have thought out 50 different scenarios, if the 51st plays out, that does not mean that you are not doing good. To me, and that is my personal view on the matter, this is even more than flexibility. It is about being able to live with the fact that actually, you are not *that* important".

Although it is important for a facilitator to be confident in him/herself and to trust the process, there is also a limit to this. As Koen already indicated, you must be wary not to become overconfident. Robbert warns every facilitator: "If you adopt an 'I know it all' attitude that indicates that the process has no chance of failure, it might be that some of the participants will just not tell certain stories, which keeps you outside of the true interpersonal process". This suggests that although being confident is generally a good thing, one must be aware to stay humble and open-minded for new things. When talking about the *off-stage* behaviour of the facilitator, Robbert explains that he has little influence on what happens there, this is where trusting the process comes into play: "You can only hope it goes well, or that one way or another, what happens outside the gatherings will come back into the process, so that you can do something with that and include it in the process."

These findings offer a new perspective on the true nature of the different kinds of connections that take place during a

successful AI process. Assuming the following conditions to be true: (1) the influence of the participating organisation, the leadership in particular, on the outcome of the process is relatively high, depending on their willingness to change and openness. (2) The influence of the AI facilitator is present, but limited to mostly *on-stage* behaviour, and moderated by the personal approach and attitude of the facilitator. If these conditions are true, then four different levels of connection can be distinguished to be crucial for the process. (1) The facilitator must be connected to the process, meaning that he/she must be truly present and alert. (2) There must be a genuine connection, a strong bond between the facilitator and the participants. (3) The participants must have complete trust in the facilitator to give him/her the freedom and space to act as he/she feels fit for what the process needs at that point. This level of trust is generated through conversations and storytelling. (4) It is imperative for the outcome of the process that the facilitator trusts not only him/herself but also the participants and the process. He/she should, however, be wary of overconfidence.

4.3.3 Shared reality

As Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) already stated, Appreciative Inquiry enables organisations to collectively move towards a desired future, which consists of a shared sense of reality that is constructed from a combination of the individual interests and subjective realities of the participants. As the poetic principle implies, this reality is constantly being co-constructed by the choices people make. Throughout the process, the shared reality can unfold, empowering the participants and giving them ownership over the process. Cora explains that in her

processes, she looks for ways to bring together every person's own truth so that they can collectively make decisions and move forward. Robbert puts it like this: "It is about finding a kind of coalition within an organisation, by which you can connect, by which you feel like you are taking on the process together, that is very essential". Herman agrees and expands on this: "As a facilitator, you are part of a team, you initiate a process and jointly create something". He further elaborates: "There is an attractive future waiting. Based on our strengths, we work towards it. We find a connection to jointly build that future".

For Annet, this shared reality is always happening: "I think that what originates during trainings or gatherings, just as during this conversation, is that you create reality together. And like AI claims, you do that in relation to each other". Annet explains that it is crucial to find each other in a shared sense of reality, she started using this idea increasingly more during her processes: "If you don't find each other in a kind of shared sense of the reality of that situation, that is where it goes wrong. I use that a lot more often these days, the concept of understanding each other, of merging horizons".

To merge these horizons, the facilitator must seek to combine the individual interests of the participants. The shared reality can only be shared by everyone if each participant has a stake in it. Cora explains: "You must keep in mind that it is not equally important to everyone". She specifies: "You have to make sure that every person gets their *money's worth*, if you can do that, people are often very willing to think along from the get-go and

look for solutions". This is so important to Cora because it is about their reality, their truth and the meaning they attach to the situation.

Robbert states: "I have a very strong focus on the subjective reality of the people and the group". Annet also acknowledges the importance of this, adding that "it is very important to know the perspectives of the others during an appreciative research". Robbert then links the subjective reality to the development of connections: "You are taking the values and experiences of people more seriously in order to see how the relationship is able to take shape". He adds "The only thing I do anymore is, I stay with these life stories of people. That is the gateway to change and innovation". Cora agrees, saying that it is imperative to know how others experienced the past and the facilitator has to accept that this reality is different for everyone. According to Herman, these stories of how we experienced the past brings an element of reality into the organisation. Not only is it important to realize that everyone has their own story and that everyone experiences reality in their own way, Joep also suggests that it is possible that although you might hear or read the same story several times, your understanding of it can be different on each occasion: "Eventually this can become a way of *being*".

Furthermore, the shared vision that combines the subjective reality of the participants, helps them to become more involved in the process. Sensing that the process belongs to them, that they are in charge of what happens, is an essential element of playing into their willingness to change. Cora recalls a process where she behaved very hands-on and direct,

predetermining a solution for the participants, which was generally resisted by them: "I am a good conceptual thinker, I can see what it is about in a heartbeat. I noticed that this was far less accepted than if it were to be invented by themselves. At that point, I thought to myself that they are not using the language correctly. And then I realized, that is not what it is about. It is about their reality, about their truth and the meaning they give to this experience". Koen specifies that for him, it is important that "the process is controlled and executed by the organisation". According to Luc: "the participants need to feel that they have a say in the matter, they can think along and decide". For Luc, the ownership factor is indispensable during the process: "Groups are instructed to come up with something or create something together. I strongly emphasize the idea of self-managing groups, jointly responsible groups, I strongly emphasize the fact that these groups are jointly responsible for their output". This kind of involvement and independence is at the foundation of that feeling of ownership.

Annet likes to use the words of Confucius (450 BC): "*Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn*". Implying that the only way for the participating organisation to truly change so that they can reach their desired, shared future, is to be involved in the process. A high level of involvement puts the power in the hands of the participants, which generates a proud sense of ownership. This sense of ownership, this feeling of 'look what we created', is crucial for the success of the process, especially when looking at the long term. Annet closes off by saying "I am simply unable to design an AI process if I can't do it with the people that work there [the organisation]".

This all implies that if the organisation's willingness to change and open attitude is one of the crucial factors for the success of an AI process, then having a feeling of ownership, like the process and its outcome is completely up to them, is imperative as well. This feeling of ownership cannot be given, it has to come naturally. Therefore, having the participants involved in the process is essential for its success. The process is monitored by the whole, not merely by the facilitators. They might be there to guide it, but it is up to the participants to perform the needed actions. Facilitators that combine the subjective realities of the participants are able to help them see the bigger picture of a brighter future. This image attracts the participants and pulls them together to jointly take the right steps towards it.

4.4 Process Architecture

Another element that plays a part in the successful usage of Appreciative Inquiry to facilitate organisational change is the architecture of the process itself. Little research has been done to discover what successful processes look like. The process architecture generally comes down to three phases that have to be fulfilled; the preparation, the process itself and the follow-up. Luc, Arno, and Herman emphasize the importance of the last phase within process architecture, the follow-up. Luc talks about

one of the summits he guided: "what this summit, even more than others, taught me, is the importance of a process architecture that makes sure that the ideas and decisions that came up during the summit, are followed-up as well". Herman confirms, saying: "the architecture to follow-up the process is crucial for its success". Although the other facilitators have not mentioned anything specifically about the architecture, they did talk about the preparation, their own approach towards the process and the follow-up. The general structure and outline of such a process architecture are illustrated in figure 5.

Having a decent process architecture allows for customization. Annet claims: "there is no one-size-fits-all anymore". She emphasizes: "there is no standard answer to problems anymore, you have to create a tailor-made process, otherwise it simply won't connect with them. In that sense, I tailor each process, which is very challenging as well". Being able to customize each process to fit the needs of the participating organisations, resonates with the idea of creating a shared reality. If the process is not uniquely theirs, if they do not feel like they own the process, like they are creating the process as they go, it will not be as successful as it could have been. However, through the findings, I identified some recurring practices that positively influence the outcome of the process. Although principles like constructionism, getting the

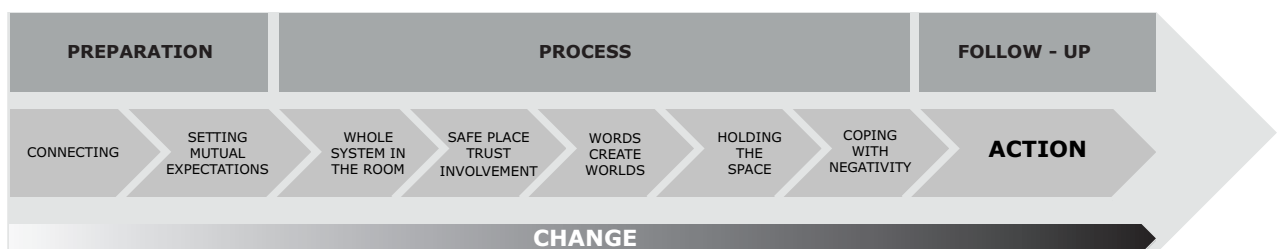


Figure 5: Process architecture of a successful AI process

whole system in the room and others are mentioned in most of the literature on AI, this research emphasizes their importance to the success of the process.

4.4.1 Preparation

Setting up the process architecture starts with the preparation. It acts as a guideline for the process, a compass that helps the facilitator navigate the process to success. Heike is a big believer in good preparation: "The preparation to me is like a tree at the centre. It is the North Star that helps me see the intention. I have prepared the process, now we will see how it goes". Barbara uses the statement "Plan tight, hang loose" to illustrate that you should be thoroughly prepared to keep it spontaneous. This very much resonates with Koen's philosophies. He states: "The preparation gives me a framework, but the methods, they come up as we go". He also explains that he seldomly writes his preparations down, which does not mean he is not prepared at all.

Luc also places a lot of importance on the preparation of the summit. To him, this is at the core of facilitating: "Guiding a summit is peanuts, the crux of the work of a facilitator is not guiding the process, guiding is just following the process, the true craftsmanship, the element of professionalism is designing the process". He uses the preparation as a guide to specify the goal of every phase within the process. The preparation clarifies what Luc expects from the participants and which questions are valuable to utilize during the group activities.

For Annet, Barbara, Cora and Heike, the preparation starts with at least two interviews with the participating organisation. As already mentioned, connecting with the top of the

organization early on can be very beneficial for the success of the process. These conversations can be held in a variety of ways. Heike likes to go on a 'coffee date' with the people, Barbara has used appreciative interviews in the past, this very much depends on the facilitator and the participant. However, talking with the participants in advance helps the facilitator become more involved with the process.

Part of the preparation is also to set the expectations in both ways. By conversing with the participants in advance, the facilitator can discover their expectations and hopes for the outcome of the process. Koen expresses it as follows: "One of the first questions I put on the flip-over, whether online or in-person, is; when are you going to be satisfied?, what is the one question that you want to find an answer to?". Heike talks about formulating the values for the process: "once the values are formulated, it is important that they can be lived throughout the entire company". However, there are two sides to this story. Just as the facilitator needs to understand the expectations of the participants to provide a tailored process, the participants also need to know what is expected of them. Luc asserts: "I am explicit in my expectations for the goal so that they can make up solutions with each other".

The way, shape or form this preparation comes in, is different for each facilitator. Barbara and Heike prefer to set up a manuscript that describes everything they and the participants can expect from the process. Both Barbara and Heike express that having this precise guideline allows them to be free and without worries during the process. It contains all the information there is to know

about the process which also provides the participants with a point of reference to see where in the process they are. It describes the mutual expectations so that there can be no misunderstandings about the intentions of the process. This kind of preparation makes Barbara and Heike feel confident to deviate from the program where needed, it enables them to free up space for whatever valuable situation, story or emotion occurs.

However, setting up a strict, written out program is not necessarily the norm for success. For Koen, to successfully facilitate an AI process, he has to be completely free: "If I have to write it [the process architecture] all down, I feel claustrophobic. It is not because I haven't written down anything, that I'm not prepared. It [not writing anything down] is a lot more exhausting, because I'm constantly thinking. I might know in advance the first thing that I'm going to do, but other than that, I rely on ideas that come at the moment".

In summary, before the process starts, it is advisable to have some sort of preparation ready. The preparation acts as a guideline that indicates the ideal course of the process, while in the meantime it enables the facilitator to be freer in his/her actions and open to exploring what comes up. Clarifying mutual expectations about the outcome of the process allows the facilitator to design a tailor-made process and prevents fundamental misunderstandings. The method and shape of the preparation, however, varies from facilitator to facilitator but should be appropriate to facilitate the desired outcome.

4.4.2 Process

Once the preparation is in place and there is a clear vision to work towards, the facilitator

merely has to guide the process. As Luc already explained, guiding the process is peanuts, the true craft is in the design. However, to guide the process to a successful outcome, there are some factors to keep in mind. During the conversations with the facilitators, various themes were emphasized. These themes form the foundation of experience-based guidelines that have led to the success of many processes. It should be noted that each participant has a personal preference for certain methods and practices that lay the groundwork for their personal style. This will be discussed in the latter part of this section. We will start by elaborating on the themes that seem to recur across the interviews.

At the start of the process, it is up to the facilitator to define the right approach that will allow the process to facilitate the desired outcome. Koen emphasizes the fact that he does not exclusively use AI during his processes: "I am not someone that only uses AI, there are a couple of practitioners who think AI is everything and that is absolutely okay, but with me, it is mostly a mixture. I really like to extract everything that works, or at least everything that works for that group at that moment". This suggests that using AI to facilitate organisational change does not necessarily mean using the AI method. You can still work from the AI philosophy while using a variety of methods.

Cora adds that it is important to "apply AI in a more nuanced way". Robbert builds on that thought saying: "you have to be able to review appreciation critically". The key difference between change from a problem-solving approach and change from an AI approach is according to Herman: "With change from a

problem-solving approach the resistance is strengthened by the underlying dynamics of causing fear and inducing feelings of guilt, creating what we call a 'burned platform'. On the other hand, Cora explains that in her experience, when working with AI, people tend to become more confident: "I always notice that when I work with AI, people gain confidence, which also boosts my enthusiasm. They feel like they can get anything they want. You don't approach people on their inabilities, but on their abilities". Although Cora has always been used to a problem-solving approach where they analyse and diagnose problems, she noticed that people were not in a happy mood. She adds: "So at that point, I consciously used a more positive approach. I looked at what they did well and what was fun for us. And then things got better. It worked really well". Arno complies by recalling one of his processes where he guided a young mother to whom it seemed to be impossible to find work: "By conversing with a positive intent and focusing on her strengths, we noticed a huge difference already". A couple of months later, that same mother found a job that played right into her strengths and even better, she liked to do it as well.

The combination of these stories confirms that when using an Appreciative Inquiry-based approach, appreciating, evidently, plays a large role. Herman explains: "We appreciate what is good, which gives us a hunger for better. One is not forced to escape the present, one wants to escape it because the future is so attractive. The why-question about the future is the most powerful question". This suggests that by appreciating what is good, appreciating what is, we long for even better times, we long for a future that

awaits us. The why-question is what provides us with the drive to get there. Robbert expresses his experience with the appreciative approach, saying: "I think that it really contributed [to the success of the process], the fact that we chose to use an appreciative approach". Luc associates appreciation with the way he views the world: "I wear an appreciative *lens*, note that appreciation is not to be confused with positivity. To me, appreciating is about more than only the positive, appreciating is about accepting where people are in their lives, at work, at a certain moment, and if they experience a negative emotion, I will appreciate that as well". In the latter sections of the findings, we will dive deeper into the personal perspectives on *appreciation*. However, when assigned with the task to successfully facilitate organizational change, these facilitators obviously prefer to use an appreciative approach.

I. Getting the whole system in the room

If there is one theme that stands out from the others, besides the theme of *connection*, it is the emphasis that the facilitators expressed on having the whole system in the room. Cooperrider (2012) already mentioned the importance of the principle of wholeness, claiming that AI is not exclusively about the positive, it is about the experience of wholeness. He also states that true innovation can only take place if all the stakeholders are involved in the process. Interviews with the facilitators not only confirm this claim but enlarge its importance. Herman explains that to make sure that the shared values are lived throughout the entire organisation, he strongly emphasizes the importance of bringing the whole system into the room.

In one of his stories, Luc talks about a process he guided at a school. He explained that the school was very resistant to include students in the process, but Luc stood his ground: "I think that whomever you might ask about that weekend, be it the chairman, the principal or the teachers, if you were to ask them about the success of that process, everybody will give you the same answer; the participation of the students". In that experience of wholeness, it is imperative to make sure that the people at whom the process is aimed are represented sufficiently. To include all voices in the room means to ensure that we involve all the stakeholders. Luc goes on: "The entire idea of getting the whole system in the room is that if people realize what the big picture actually is, how complex it actually is, that there are various interests, if they realize that, something special always happens. New relationships and insights can be formed and people start thinking in their perspective from the big picture".

Robbert recalls a similar process he facilitated in a hospital: "We actually did two rounds of appreciative research. During the first round, it was *not-done* to include any of the patients. At the start of the second round, we involved the co-assistants in the process. They asked us why we were not interviewing the patients. They were absolutely keen on including them in the process. During that second round, we were allowed to talk with the patients, and it turned out to be a success. We saw that we were able to break through certain barriers".

Annet defines this principle as including a "broad cross-section of the organisation". She explains that to form a complete picture of reality, you must combine the perspective of all the stakeholders in the process, which

resonates strongly with the idea of creating a shared reality. Barbara explains that from her experiences, the process is not as important as the big picture: "To me, it's less about the process itself, it's not unimportant because that's where it all happens, but to me, it's truly about the big picture. What are we working for together? This [the big picture] can be used as a reference to test the quality of the steps we take".

The commonly used concept of bringing the whole system in the room is often focused exclusively on including all the stakeholders during the process. However, a true sense of wholeness goes further than that. Robbert continues the story of his process in the hospital: "What made me more humble was that when you get in contact with an organisation, for example, this hospital, you think you know a hospital pretty well, but actually you're never sure of what really goes on. Being open to that element of unexpectedness, for stories that lie within the periphery of your research, demands a certain level of open-mindedness and sensitivity to gradually gain their trust in order to hear their stories and be able to deal with them respectfully". He further elaborates on the story: "When we were already working with them for a couple of months, we started picking up on these stories about physical aggression between doctors and nurses. That is when a second theme emerged, which I call the *hidden theme*, of how these medical professionals behaved towards one another. At that point, the people expressed that if they truly want to improve the experiences of their patients, they have to start with improving their own behaviour". This experience opened his eyes as he states: "After that, I started experimenting more and more with these

kinds of stories and themes". He explains "The whole system is not only all the people in the room or the chain that we mention so often, but it is also all the stories and experiences that are present in that whole system, you never know in advance what goes on and what is public. To a higher degree, this can determine the depth of your research process".

This thus suggests that including the whole system in the room goes beyond the inclusion of all stakeholders. Not only is it important to include all the voices in the room, especially the ones at whom the process is aimed, it is also crucial to get a true understanding of what plays inside an organisation to comprehend the bigger picture and focus on the goal. For the participants to feel comfortable enough to tell these *hidden stories* that are associated with the *shadow side* of Appreciative Inquiry, the connection between the facilitator and the participants once again proves to be essential. The fact that the facilitators stood their ground and made no compromises when it came to the inclusion of all the stakeholders, proves that this theme plays a larger role in the success of the process than current literature indicates.

II. Atmosphere

Even though current literature does not go into much detail about how the atmosphere prevails during the process, according to the majority of the questioned facilitators, it is an important factor during the process. The right atmosphere allows the participants to open up for connection, for change, it is what allows them to generate that shared sense of reality. Koen speaks about "creating a cocoon in which beautiful things can emerge". Koen is a

firm believer in the power of the right atmosphere, an atmosphere where everything that comes up is okay, everything is allowed: "I often use the metaphor of a campfire feeling, that feeling that when people arrive, they already feel that this place is fun, it's a nice place to be, a place where people can feel at home, people feel welcome, but most importantly it's an ordinary place". He calls it an open, safe environment, a fun environment, a connection, "We are just a bunch of people together and my role at that moment is different, but that doesn't make me any better or more important". During his processes, he wants himself and the participant to feel at home, to feel safe, he wants there to be equality. His processes are a place where everyone is equal.

Joep resonates with this idea. He talks about one of his AI projects where he was the manager of a unit within a telecommunication company. During his time at the company, he used a strong AI approach at the base of everything he did, he describes the atmosphere within the team as "there was a good environment with each other, I did not act as their boss". He associates this with the concept of *holding space*, which will be explained later in this section.

Luc, Cora, Annet and Barbara all agree that the atmosphere during a process has to be in check. There should be a fun atmosphere with positive energy that allows room for new ideas and creativity. At the foundation of the atmosphere, once again, is the concept of mutual trust. The bond between the facilitator and the participants once more proves to be the central element. The right atmosphere provides a sense of safety that enables the participants to speak freely and openly, which

is necessary to get an understanding of the whole system in the room.

III. Constructionism

The bedrock of Appreciative Inquiry can be found in the constructionist principle, claiming that the interactions between people, the way we speak, the language we use and what we focus on, all will determine how we perceive the world around us and thus impact our sense of reality (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012). Annet completely agrees with this reasoning when asked if she pays attention to the principle of “words create worlds” during her summits: “I do think that this is the base, it is the foundation for everything you do”. She further elaborates: “I pay a lot of attention to the way I phrase things, it also has to do with what I said earlier, the element of tailored processes, realising where they currently are, what problems they encounter, what they want and the way they see it”. “What you focus on during a conversation is very important, because what you focus on grows”. Heike adds that “If what you focus on grows, that means that if you coach a problem, you will end up knowing more about the problem than you know about the solution”.

Koen expresses that he is sensitive to umbrella terms. He explains: “I tell people to be aware of the words they use because they do have an impact, the way you look at the world, the way people react. I use this expression a lot. That is also why I’m so sensitive to umbrella terms. I work a lot on mission and vision statements. In these statements, companies often use the word *respect*. I do believe that they respect the individuality of every person, but it just says nothing. So, I am pretty sensitive to that,

using the right words”. Herman takes this even further, he explains how our language is too limited to express how we feel and that metaphors and various forms of art often do a better job of showing our true colours: “Our logical language is too limited to express what really goes on within us. We have to broaden our language and enrich it. Today we use music, images, and forms of art to enrich our language. Yet still, our language is often too thin to express what we really feel. It happens a lot that there are just no words to describe our emotions and that is why the poetic principle is so important. Metaphors can act as a gateway in these situations. We can for example ask questions like: “Is there a piece of music that you would associate with this experience?”.

If words create worlds and what we focus on grows, if the AI facilitator aims to successfully facilitate organisational change in the participating organisation, he/she must be aware of the language they use. Although language might sometimes be too limited to express what we really feel, the right choice of words is crucial to evoke the desired change. The right words have the power to connect people and co-construct that shared sense of reality that has been discussed extensively. However, being aware of the language you use does not stop there. Heike states: “It is a form of art within AI, you discover what you ask”. Arno elaborates: “AI is about the art of asking questions, thinking deeply about how we ask questions and which questions to ask”.

There is no need to explain that Appreciative Inquiry revolves around inquiry, the questions we ask. The principle of simultaneity points out that even the most innocent questions

have the potential to evoke change. If every question has an impact on the external world, asking the right questions, using the right language, is vital for the outcome of the process (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1997; Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2012). Heike explains: "I had to learn to appreciate the principle of simultaneity because it's true that when you ask questions that have the potential to change something at that moment, it has the potential to change the past, but also our outlook for the future. This is a new kind of change, it is different from our linear thinking." She clarifies: "because of this, our linear concept of time becomes fluid. Because if we see the present differently and we appreciate it differently, our thoughts about the past change as well, which changes the past". This implies that the questions we ask not only impact the way we feel in that moment, but also the way we feel about our past experiences, which therefore changes our subjective reality of the past. Furthermore, because something changes at this moment, our outlook on the future also changes. Thus, because of the transformative power of the questions we ask, we have to pay attention to the words we use and the way we use them.

Herman claims: "it is important to come up with the right questions, questions that connect the experiences of the people with where they want to end up. Questions that invite them to look at what we know, but from a different perspective. Questions that invite them to think and remember. In short, generative questions". Koen adds: "the questions coming from my mouth are often AI tinted, these are very appreciative questions, very curious questions, and that is truly inquiring, that is so important".

As already established, the AI process is influenced by both the facilitator and the participants. Consequently, it is not only the facilitator who should be aware of the words he/she uses and the questions he/she asks, the participants have to adopt this attitude as well. If the interconnection and the atmosphere are right, the participants are more likely to follow the example of the facilitator. To get the participants to ask the right questions and be aware of their effect, Luc reveals: "I really just give them the questions, but not the answer". Herman implies that questions that arise from genuine curiosity are always *the right questions*. Heike makes them think by instructing them to think of a question they truly do not know the answer to, something they have a different perspective on, something in which might discover new connections between their hearts desires and what they are curious about. The questions that arise during Koen's summits even determine the way he approaches the process: "I elaborate on the questions that come up and that way, new methods arise on the spot. I invent these methods while we're going, and I truly love doing it that way".

Besides our language and the questions we ask, a third powerful paradigm in Appreciative Inquiry is storytelling. Barbara illustrates: "Appreciative questions make people think of stories. If you were to ask a person 'what are you really proud of?' he/she can really tell a story with that. It is what you already said, you can see it in someone's eyes. That is such a powerful thing about questions". The words we use and the questions we ask have the generative power to evoke stories. Storytelling and sharing personal experiences are the start of conversations, which is an

essential factor for true connections and involvement. Annet once more confirms: "The principle of words create worlds, the conversations that we have, those things determine what happens". Robbert backs this claim, stating that Appreciative Inquiry starts with the conversations that people have but he warns the facilitator about the systemic characteristics of it: "Appreciative Inquiry starts there, but at a certain point, it tends to become a bit more systemic. By using the stories of the people as fuel to plan the future. That is why I focus on the life stories of the people, which is the gateway to change and innovation".

The poetic principle states that through the constant co-construction of reality, people have the power to direct their own story. What they focus on, will determine what they find, which is why telling positive stories is so powerful during the process. Koen talks about how he truly loves to tell stories: "It is also very inviting, isn't it, when you tell a story or a fun anecdote about the little things". This inviting characteristic is about what Appreciative Inquiry tends to call *generativity*. Luc once again talks about how he sees the world through a storytelling *lens*: "I wear a storytelling lens, a lot of how we behave ourselves as an organisation originates from the stories we tell each other, about how we experience things, that is one of the lenses I look through".

In accordance with Heike's philosophy about the fluid concept of time, Herman explains how our past is at the base of how we see the future: "The past is the foundation; past, present and future can't be seen separately. When we talk about the past, we talk logically, as if we are rational beings. To break through

this barrier, I use storytelling and metaphors. I use this with stories about the future and with the ideal images of people". Herman explains that because of these elements, because of the appreciative questions, conversations between people can unfold: "In my experience, I see that conversations get going when people tend to come to appreciative questions on their own".

In Joep's experience, storytelling helps us to slow down time: "Because of the acceleration of the world in its entirety, telling stories and AI help us to slow down. In fact, storytelling slows us down". If storytelling helps to slow us down, it provides us with the opportunity to connect better, to use our time in a more meaningful way, accordingly, Robbert adds: "In the content of the stories and the research, people are able to make large leaps forward".

In summary, the experiences of the facilitators combined suggest that the constructionist principle is indeed very important for the success of the AI change process. It hides in the language we use and the words we choose because these words are what create our questions. Every question we ask, no matter how large or small, has an impact on the way we see the world around us, but also our personal past, present and future. Therefore, it is imperative to be aware of the language and the intent behind our questions. The generative power of questions has the potential to evoke stories, which are a means to break through our rational barriers. Stories are at the base of conversations, which in its turn are crucial for true connection and involvement. Storytelling and conversation allow us to *slow down time* and collectively

move forward towards our shared vision of the ideal future.

IV. Holding the space

As we start to focus more on the actual approach and personal style of the facilitators, one theme comes up in every interview; the concept of *holding the space*. For some, like Joep, this is the bedrock for their approach, for others, it is more of a principle to keep in mind. However, all of the facilitators agree that holding the space is crucial for the open atmosphere, the connection, the involvement, to cope with negativity and with all these factors combined, the outcome of the process. Joep calls himself a "spaceholder": he elaborates, "I facilitate space, I *hold* space. I do this from the principles of appreciative leadership". Joep explains that holding the space enables the facilitator to be completely open for anything that emerges: "Really facilitating from the perspective of a leader so that whatever happens, has the opportunity to unfold". Koen further explains that the process "is not only about fun, but it is also about giving space to beautiful happenings and being able to see that". When working with organisations that have to work together, holding the space means that you can really make space for these groups, Luc elaborates: "Give them the space to be innovative. Traditional project management tends to kill this". Barbara even calls it a pitfall for every facilitator to not hold the space: "Please don't fall into the trap of not making space for what comes up". She further explains that because of her thorough preparation, she is able to guide and tailor the process as they go: "It can very well be that you prepared a tight agenda, but you notice that not much time is scheduled for a part that really energizes the participants, you don't have much time to talk

about that specific part. The art is to be able to let it go and clear the space".

Holding the space is about feeling what the process needs and being open enough to elaborate on that and clearing the schedule to inquire into what seems to be important for the participants. Barbara adds: "I truly think that it helps a lot, being very open to everything that comes along the way and being able to react accordingly". This is also part of the poetic principle. The facilitator has to be open to elaborate on whatever comes up. During the process oftentimes feelings or stories will come up and the fact that they do implies that they are important to the participants, which is exactly why it is essential to do something with it. The concept of holding the space is also very much related to not having a predetermined solution. In these tailored processes, holding the space becomes essential for the outcome.

Annet adds, "I really just listen to the process, I listen if something needs more attention or not". Cora completely agrees, saying that she chooses her methods according to what she feels the process needs at that moment. Herman also expresses that he brings in certain methods in function of what the participant needs. As a facilitator, holding the space means that you can *feel* the room. There is a very pragmatic element to looking at what is needed at that point in the process. Heike states: "To me, AI is about having intentions, you know *what* is going to happen, but *how* it happens is determined during the process. To me, it is normal to have a plan, an intention, but you never know what is going on at the moment, right now".

Holding the space also suggests that the facilitator has to set clear boundaries. In line with setting an open, safe atmosphere, holding the space indicates the extent of this safe learning environment. Luc expresses it using a metaphor: "A river without banks becomes a puddle, if you remove the banks of the river, water moves everywhere and you end up with just a surface of mud". Joep talks about the same phenomenon: "I set the boundaries within the organisation. Right now, I'm working with the management of a university and indeed, we are talking about setting boundaries. Setting boundaries about what is possible on a financial level and a physical level, but it is always about holding the space, I really think that mirrors who I am". Setting boundaries does not mean that some things might not be appropriate during the process, on the contrary, it enables the facilitator and participants to be open and feel safe, it is an essential part of the atmosphere and has the potential to create that true campfire feeling that Koen likes to talk about.

V. Coping with the Shadow Dimension

Although an AI process initially focuses on *what brings life* and considers a more *positive* perspective of the world, people in all their facets are a mixture of the positive and the "negative". A facilitator should not shy away from these negative subjects. As Bushe (2007) already mentioned, focusing on the positive does not guarantee the success of the process. On the contrary, focusing only on the positive is considered to be a pitfall according to the facilitators in this research. Appreciation is about more than only the positive. It is about appreciating all that comes up, thus also the negative. The importance of coping with negativity can be found in the principle of bringing the whole

system into the room. If the process must have the whole system represented, meaning all the stakeholders, but also all the stories and experiences, then including the negative stories and emotions that come up are also crucial for the outcome. A facilitator that successfully holds the space, can make room for *hidden stories*, as Robbert calls them, to unfold which helps them get a total understanding of the bigger picture.

What goes up, must come down

There is always something that an organisation is not happy about, if there wasn't, there would be no need for the process. Annet explains that it is "very dependent on the context, sometimes it happens [negativity comes up] in the group while you've already been working for a while, sometimes it comes up in the beginning when you're still searching". When talking about her processes, she specifies that they all had problems or things they were not happy about. This feeling is often very present. She recalls a process that started with a high degree of negativity: "They all had problems, there were so many things they were unhappy about, that was extremely present there. This might even be the strongest negative feelings I have encountered in all my years of working. I felt like I couldn't just redirect this towards the positive". Cora had a similar experience, she states: "If you start immediately with what goes right, it might not work as well because people are still thinking about their problems". When Joep encounters these problems, he explains that there is a difference between technical problems, which can be resolved and non-technical problems, which actually do not exist. He explains: "If we were to say that non-technical problems do exist, then I want to be able to look behind

them, which makes them disappear. My definition of a non-technical problem is that it simply is a frustrated dream, and the dream was there first”.

Herman weighs in on the matter, saying that negativity or weak points simply indicate that the people want something else, so what is it they want? If people express a problem, it simply means that there is something behind it. Somewhere there is a wish that did not come through, there is an unfulfilled dream, Luc calls it a “wrapped dream”. Annet explains that these problems only express what we don’t want, which drains a lot of energy. The role of the facilitator is to educate the participants in the first place about what a problem actually is. If we were to look at the problem from the perspective of a certain need or a certain wish, what would that wish be? The fact that these negative feelings come to the surface also indicates that there is a certain level of involvement from the participants, according to Annet. Even in the shadow dimension, the connection between the facilitator and the participants comes up. Herman describes this as an opportunity to connect with the people, wherever they are and once that crucial connection has been made, you can start facilitating what we call the *negative*.

Closure

Often before people can dream about the future with a positive outlook, they must get the negativity out of their system. Heike points out: “Sometimes people are not willing to plan and build. First, they need to be able to mourn and they need to have the opportunity to be angry. So that is what we start with. There are various methods to guide this. I like to just write down all the *shit*, give

it a name and an expression”. Heike calls this method the *shit-sheet*, which is simply a sheet on a flip chart that is completely devoted to writing down all the negative feelings. She recalls one of her processes where the negativity was obvious: “They were unable to dream because of their fear. That is why we did the *shit-sheet*. We wrote down everything they were afraid of. People cried, people got angry and after a couple of sheets, everything was out”. She adds that this *shit-sheet* method is a fixed part of her repertoire now. She still uses it on several occasions, sometimes even before they start the summit.

Cora relates to this idea with her own story. She looks back at one of her own processes where a new manager was assigned to a company. The previous manager created a corporate culture thriving on distrust and fear. The new manager expressed his concerns to Cora, saying that he felt like he could not get a grasp on the people, he felt like the old atmosphere was still lurking in the company, Cora explains: “Just let them talk about what goes wrong, afterwards they will be willing to talk about what goes right”. She facilitated the process successfully, helping them to reframe their negative feelings and come up with a new shared vision for the future. After the process, they expressed their gratitude to Cora, stating: “We can move on now. Everything has been said about the past. We can finally leave it behind”.

What came down, must go up

Each of the facilitators was asked to talk about the *right* way to cope with negativity. Luc explains that he is unsure if there is a *right* way to cope with it. However, all the facilitators unanimously agreed that that negativity is a part of appreciation. Joep

claims: "What's there, is there, to me, that is also a part of appreciation. To appreciate means truly appreciating everything there is. You don't have to like it, but everything there is". Heike expresses "Here we are again, just appreciate the *shit*". Herman agrees, saying that to him, the shadow side also has to be appreciated. Arno, however, emphasizes that although it is important to give attention to the negative, one should not focus on it: "If you focus on the barriers, the goal will fall, but if you focus on the goal, the barriers will fall".

But how does one appreciate the negative? Barbara explains that she makes room for it during the process: "So I like to make some room for anything that can be called *negative*, and you'll notice that it will come up during the process. You have to make some room for that, you have to make it negotiable". The facilitators all express the importance of not ignoring the negative, on the contrary, it must be dealt with, it has to be given attention. You should never ignore or deny any negativity that comes up. Robbert, who wrote an article about the shadow side of AI in 2012, talks about rather negative stories. He used this experience to make a shift from talking about positive stories to talking about valuable stories because if we are to talk about positive stories exclusively, other stories that might be very valuable to the participants might not come up at all, which brings us back to the theme of *hidden stories*. From that moment on, he consciously started asking for valuable stories instead of positive stories. As he puts it in his own words; "It is not up to me to judge if these stories are positive or negative".

One generally accepted method within Appreciative Inquiry to redirect the negative into the positive is the method of reframing.

Luc, Annet, Joep, and Barbara have indicated that they have used this method during their processes. Annet talks about one of her processes where negativity came up: "These dream-questions are really helpful, imagine that your ideal picture would be realised when you arrive at work tomorrow, what would that look like? The intent behind this is to get someone out of their regular way of thinking that reminds them of what is not possible". Barbara suggests looking into what is valuable for the participants in their stories, "There is always something valuable". Luc explains it in detail: "Actually, these reframing questions are a way to give people the space to think of things that are important to them. I just invite them to surpass their complaints or negativity". Following Robbert, Barbara and Luc, Joep also tries to look at negativity from the perspective of what they want to change about it: "I start with acknowledging it [the negativity], then I say to them; I hear what you're saying, so let's look at it, and let's look at it from the perspective that we define it as something you want to change". This way he is able to discover the *unfulfilled dream* and reframe the negative.

However, acknowledging and reframing the negative feelings are also no assurance for success. Koen recalls a summit where he really had to work to reframe the negativity, but nothing worked: "I invested a lot of effort at that moment, but I just wasn't able to do it. I think I might have started working a bit too hard. I should have just said to them 'I have no idea what to do with this', just literally say it like that in front of the group, I didn't know what to do with it. I started working way too hard, I had this kind of feeling, this feeling that I needed to get that negativity out of there, while I should have just said 'I had

great plans for tonight, but apparently these were not the right plans', and then let silence fill the room. Right now, I would just do it like that, I really learned from that".

In summary, when talking about appreciating what is, we consider the positive and the negative. A shift from talking about *positive* stories to talking about *valuable* stories is advisable to get a grasp of the whole system. As a facilitator it is important to realise that somewhere before or during the process, negativity will come up in some way, shape or form. When this happens, the facilitator must acknowledge it and look for the *unfulfilled dream* behind it. Negative feelings simply mean that something has to change, which is why they asked for a change process in the first place. Subsequently, these negative feelings can be processed and reframed using reframing questions. These questions allow the facilitator to redirect the focus towards a positive vision for the future again, as to move on with the process and work towards the desired outcome.

VI. Personal Style

Assuming the facilitator has an influence on the process, and his/her connection with the participants is crucial for the success of the AI change process, it can be suggested that having a tailored process also applies to the facilitator. If the process is tailored to fit the mutual expectations, the personal style and approach of the facilitator are included in the process as well. When talking about her personal style of facilitating, Barbara states: "I think it has a lot to do with who you are as a person". When asking Robbert if someone else were to guide his past processes instead of him, he replied: "I do think that a fellow appreciative facilitator could have probably

reached the same level of success. Of course, every person has his/her own style, so undoubtedly, there would have been a different effect". Cora suggests that "there are different ways to apply it [Appreciative Inquiry] in different branches of society, but of course it is also very different for every facilitator". Heike hints that it not only differs in terms of personality but also in the way they learned about AI: "If you look at the way each person has been trained, there are many different ways as well".

Barbara expressed the importance of staying close to who you are. This also applies when it comes to the personal approach and style of the facilitator. Every facilitator that has been questioned had his/her own methods and practices, all of which might be very interesting in their own way. However, the practices a facilitator uses must be comfortable for them. A facilitator will always be able to perform his/her best when they are free to do it their own way. Koen recalls a process where he was asked to write the entire program down. Koen has a very intuitive and free style. He likes to approach things as they come up, not thinking too much in advance and relying on his intuition to feel what the process needs at that moment. He elaborates: "It is a lot easier when you write down everything about the process because you can email it and make sure that everything is right. A while ago, I guided a thing or two for a company that asked me to write everything down. Fortunately, I did not have to write it down myself, someone else did it, but it was all written down. That made me feel really claustrophobic because I had a very weird feeling about that. I thought it was very interesting that they really wanted it written down, but I learned to feel comfortable

in this kind of uncomfortable situation". He later states: "The tighter the plan has to be, the more unhappy I feel".

What stands out is that Barbara, Koen and Robbert are all very observing, meaning that they observe what happens before they react. Barbara explains: "I'm a very observant person, I observe everything that happens and with that, I try to determine what to do with it". Robbert reveals: "My personal style is very observing. Often, I just look to see how it goes, where it goes right, what the roadblocks are, and from this, I make sure to create the conditions upon which these processes can proceed. This is how we can tackle problems as they emerge".

One of the topics that also came up was the topic of intuition or gut feeling. In line with the concept of holding the space, this AI intuition indicates that some facilitators just follow their *gut feeling* to determine what needs to happen. Koen discusses the topic as follows "Following your intuition, I think that is a very interesting topic because intuition is also grounded in experience, it is not random. People often refer to intuition as something very loose, while I believe that it is something sound. It is grounded, it comes from within. Intuition comes when you just feel that apparently, *this* is the right thing to do right now". Koen claims intuition to be his trademark, he describes a situation where the participants are curious about the process, but not as curious as himself: "I really love this, when the process is about to begin, the participants often tell me that they are curious about what they're going to do, I always respond with 'me too'. At that moment you can see a bit of concern in their eyes. But I really don't know what I'm going to do yet,

because I don't know what is going to happen, I don't know with whom, so I want to feel that place and then the right questions will come up. That is kind of my trademark." Heike expresses her style as being truly present with all senses: "My style is to listen carefully, being truly present, with all senses. Putting all senses on the line with an open heart and an open mind. But always with the intention that the best possible will come out of it". For these facilitators, their *gut feeling*, their ability to hold the space, to feel the room, is defining for their personal style of facilitation.

Another aspect that is very personal to the facilitator is their relationship with the participants. Following the logic of a facilitator's influence on the process, their direct involvement with the process has to be considered as well. Luc, for example, describes his style in terms of polarity, he calls it "distant involvement", which means that he consciously chooses to keep himself at a distance during the process so that the groups are constantly working with each other. This does not mean he is not connected, this just means that he gives the participants space to claim ownership over the process. Cora, on the other hand, talks about "participative guidance", implying that she truly participates with the organisation. Annet and Herman both express how important involvement with the participants is to their personal style. Annet adds that her enthusiasm is a real trademark of her style, while Herman expresses that his connection to the participants allows him to estimate the energy in the room. Heike puts it all in perspective, saying that "In the end, everything has been the same, but the way it happened and the feelings about the experience, that will always be in relation to the client".

Most facilitators have a personal touch to their approach. Herman for example uses nature and animals as a way to connect people. He talks about learning playfully, in which the outdoor aspect is an important ingredient. Annet expresses her personality as being a do-er: "I am a do-er but I'm able to reflect on a situation from a helicopter view. That fits very well with AI, to focus and define what you want to realize and to learn by doing when building a bridge while walking across it". Heike and Robbert explain that they like to start from a dialogue in everything they do. Robbert even calls it his trademark. Joep is a large supporter of facilitating from a leadership perspective. This is an element that recurs in most of his stories. Leadership is one of the topics that are really important to him.

When inquiring into the personal style and approach of the facilitators, it is important to note that there is no right or wrong, there is no better or worse, there is only what works for him/her. Every individual is different and so is every facilitator. When it comes to the process, every facilitator has the freedom to implement whatever he/she wishes, as long as it fits the needs of what the participants and the process need at that moment. There are, however, some principles that are valuable to understand and implement in one's approach, principles that are proven to have a positive impact on the outcome of the AI change process.

In summary, a facilitator improves his/her chances of success during the process if he/she (1) gets the whole system in the room, (2) sets the right atmosphere, (3) implements the constructionist principle, and (4) holds the space, (5) can cope with negativity during the process and (5) is able to do all that, while

staying close to him/herself. As already mentioned, one of the key factors for generating that crucial mutual trust is feeling the genuineness of the other party, for which staying close to yourself is imperative.

4.4.3. Follow-up

The last part of the process architecture is the follow-up. As all facilitators agreed, the process is only the process, although a lot of new ideas, decisions, but also fun stuff can come out of such a process, without the follow-up, it will be very difficult, if not impossible to realise these ideas. Luc goes on about the process he guided at a school: "To me, it was very important that the entire process did not stop after that weekend, it went on for years. Three years after that weekend, I met again with that school to bring together the entire system once more and follow-up on the progression since then". Barbara agrees and expresses her thoughts about this: "It shouldn't be that you dreamed with each other about the future and that when you get to the action part, it appears to be impossible or you have no clue what to do next, which is why nothing happens". She adds that "What happens after the process is the centre of gravity. This is where people get to work with one another and start to realize the dreams they came up with".

For Luc, the follow-up starts at the preparatory stage. He asks the participants what way they prefer to make sure that something happens with the results of the process. According to him, this is one of the success factors of the process. He explains: "You know that this question will always come up, so you better be prepared for it". In line with the principle of simultaneity, Heike never asks the participants what they will *start* doing

differently as of the next day: "I ask them which of your strengths are you going to give more attention to? This way the change has already begun, the question is only to formalize it".

As this entire part about the process architecture indicates, there are a lot of things that come into play when designing and guiding an AI change process. It takes a lot of time and energy from both the facilitator and the participants. Having a good follow-up process, with actions in place, where it is clear who has to do what and when, ensures that this time and energy will not have been wasted. If the participants are truly connected to the process and feel like they own the results of the process, the follow-up often comes naturally to them, as they are now intrinsically motivated, or as Herman put it, it is in their DNA now.

5. DISCUSSION

The research question asks how Appreciative Inquiry can be successfully used to facilitate organisational change from the perspective of the Appreciative Inquiry change facilitator. Along the way of this theoretical sampling-based study, it became clear that the answer to this question is far from one-sided. I discover four themes that affect the outcome of the process quite a bit. The success of the process starts with the way the facilitator views AI. The findings illustrate that seeing AI as more than a method or a technique is related to the success of the process. The most important thread here is that the facilitator must fundamentally agree with the philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry if he/she wants to implement it successfully to facilitate organisational change. This matters because the facilitator always has a certain influence

on the process. The findings point out that this influence is limited to a certain degree and mostly, but not exclusively, exercised during the on-stage moments of the facilitator.

As the research established that a facilitator always brings him/herself into the process, his/her influence comes in various shapes. This refers to the way he/she approaches the process and his/her personal elements. The findings suggest that a solid process architecture is one of the key success factors for facilitating AI-based organisational change. This process architecture includes preparation, the actual approach of the process and a follow-up protocol, which turns out to be crucial for the realisation of the ideas and dreams that came out of the process. The process never stops after the initial summit, in some cases it continues to run for years, in other cases half a day seems to be sufficient. Furthermore, a facilitator must constructively approach negativity, not shying away from it, but appreciating whatever comes up. Negative feelings and experiences are reframed to provide positive energy, which brings closure and enthusiasm for the future.

Being inspired by Korthagen's (2014) Onion Model, I constructed a similar model focused on the personality layers of a successful AI facilitator. Some interesting parallels were revealed amongst the reflection of the facilitator's stories and experiences. The outer layer, the environment in which the reflection took place, situated during the Appreciative Inquiry change process. When it comes to competencies, it is clear that this is not that important to the process according to the facilitators. It has been expressed on numerous occasions that competencies can be learned by anyone and are not considered a

factor for success. Successful facilitators owe their success more to their mindset and attitude than to their abilities. It is, however, advisable to understand the foundations of Appreciative Inquiry. The findings indicate that knowing about the 4-D cycle and the principles of AI enable the facilitator to implement it more effectively and freely and be more aware of the process, which ultimately has a positive impact on the success of the process. Through the stories, it became clear that the role of a facilitator is that of a guide that shows the participants an alternative way to reach their goals while increasing enthusiasm, trust, connection, and organisational culture. The facilitator acts as a coach that puts the power into the hands of the participants and helps them to create something of their own, giving them a feeling of ownership and accomplishment.

At the more impactful levels of the model, we investigate the behaviour, or attitude that the facilitators adopt during such a process. It seems to be the case that successful facilitators are always very open-minded without prejudice. They strive to live the AI philosophy by appreciating whatever comes up. Another parallel is that the facilitators adopt a student mindset and are aware that they also still have a lot to learn. They believe that everyone has their own individuality and should be true to their own beliefs. It stands out that each of the facilitators expresses a strong belief in humankind. They are convinced that there is always something positive and that one should just appreciate what comes up. These facilitators demonstrated during the interactions that they truly believe in the AI philosophy.

All the layers above are fuelled by the mission behind these people. They chose to work from

Appreciative Inquiry because it does make a difference. The findings reveal that the mission behind Appreciative Inquiry is about moving forward together. It is about feeling energized and empowered, about seeing new opportunities, even if things go bad. It is about helping each other learn and develop to become stronger and better at what they do. The pivotal difference is in the way it happens. Whereas traditional goal-oriented approaches might entail similar results, Appreciative Inquiry does it in a way through which people grow closer to each other and their goals, which is a large part of sustaining the desired outcome. Appreciative Inquiry enables people to use their own qualities as leverage for organisational change by giving them language and method.

At the deepest level of the model, the core qualities reveal what facilitators are made of. Even though everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, their own qualities, the findings illustrate that successful facilitators are good at connecting people and sensing what the process and the participants need at any moment.

However, regardless of the impact a facilitator has on the process, regardless of the various aspects he/she has to consider, if the participating organisation does not allow it, the process ceases to begin in the first place. At the start of every process, it is crucial to get the leadership of the participating organisation on board with what is about to happen, as they set the culture that reigns within. The findings illustrate that the culture is what undergoes the true change, which makes preparing the leaders of that culture essential for the outcome. To facilitate true, lasting change, the organisation must want it, they must be open and willing to participate.

To a certain extent, they must be willing to adopt the AI attitude, especially during the process.

Lastly, for the facilitator and the participants to exercise their influence for the better of the process, a mutual connection is imperative. The interconnection between all the parties involved is the foundation upon which the process is built. This connection is constructed through genuine conversations about valuable stories and experiences. For these conversations to take place, the element of mutual trust is vital. The participants must feel like they can trust each other and the facilitator, just as the facilitator has to feel like he/she can trust the participants and, in some cases, his fellow facilitators. The element of trust goes even further, it is also about the confidence of the facilitator in his/her own being and abilities, and maybe even more important, trusting the process. This interconnectedness and mutual trust result in involvement from all sides. Every person in the room feels part of the same reality that combines their individual perspectives and melts them to form a bigger picture of the ideal outcome.

Contributions & Implications

This study contributes to the current literature in a variety of ways. It provides a more general answer to Bushe's (2011) question about the competencies required of the AI facilitator/consultant. He points out that at that moment, in 2011, this topic had hardly been discussed. He wants to discover if a lack of facilitator characteristics or skills is related to AI failure. If the right questions are crucial to finding out what you want to know, then this study illustrates that looking for the *required competencies* or *skills* is not the right

question to ask in an Appreciative Inquiry environment. Furthermore, if one wants to research Appreciative Inquiry correctly, then focusing on what makes a process fail contradicts the philosophy. Therefore, this research adopted an Appreciative Inquiry approach by focusing on the best stories and experiences of the facilitators during mutual conversations that were open to whatever came up. The findings illustrate that having the right attitude is far superior to having the right competencies when looking to successfully facilitate an AI change process. When asked about what made their processes so successful, the facilitators mostly talked about facets like connection and attitude, both of the facilitator and the participants. On no occasion did any of the facilitators indicate that their competencies, knowledge, or skills were crucial to the success of the process.

More in line with the facilitator's perception of what makes an AI facilitator successful, Bushe also questions Murrell's (2005) statement "Can any clever, healthy and spiritually grounded person with a positive attitude learn to do AI summits well". If the attitude of the facilitator is crucial to the success of the process, does that mean that having a positive attitude and being clever, healthy, and spiritually grounded makes you fit to facilitate a successful process? To a certain extent, the facilitators agree that a positive attitude and being healthy and spiritually grounded are good foundations to start with. Accordingly, as the initial statement suggests, there is still an element of learning involved. Some of the facilitators stated that an untrained facilitator with a positive attitude would be able to guide a simple process, without much complexity, but if things became more complex, the facilitator must have some base of knowledge

and skill with regards to AI, which can easily be taught. Being knowledgeable about the AI principles, the 4-D Cycle and conversational methods and tactics would suffice.

The findings of this research do not contrast or disconfirm any of the current writings about Appreciative Inquiry, on the contrary, the findings of this research strongly support most of the theory that has been elaborated on during the past 34 years. Although this research does not contribute any groundbreaking novelties or theories, it contributes to the current literature by showing a different perspective on the same phenomena that have been looked at for years. Literature about Appreciative Inquiry has boomed over the last decade, which brought with it a widespread distribution of knowledge and many so-called *spin-offs* of the initial theory. This study goes back to the basics, looking at the same philosophy, methods, and principles, but from a completely different perspective than we have been used to. In the words of Robbert, this is not evidence-based research, this is an experience-based research. By combining the perspectives of a variety of experienced and successful AI facilitators, the research finds out what is important for the practical adaptation of the AI theory and what is not. While the current literature is more of an explanatory, informational nature, this research can be seen as a compilation of best practices. In 2012, Cooperrider constituted a set of 5 conditions for success in his paper called *The concentration effect of strengths: How the whole system "AI" summit brings out the best in human enterprise*. This study and the facilitators emphasize the importance of these conditions. The findings of this paper strongly overlap with the conditions that Cooperrider

wrote about, conditions like focusing on more than the positive, educating the leadership teams about AI and including the whole system.

Since its original appearance in 1987, the majority of literature, articles, videos about Appreciative Inquiry goes into great detail about the 4-D cycle. Current literature often makes it seem like AI and the 4-D Cycle are the same, while this is not necessarily true. Appreciative Inquiry is not the 4-D cycle, but the 4-D cycle is a part of Appreciative Inquiry. In accordance with what Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) point out, the facilitators also agree that Appreciative Inquiry is more than a method or a technique. Appreciative Inquiry is not the 4-D cycle, it is the idea behind the 4-D cycle. Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy that manifests itself in the way people think, the way they live and interact with each other. The 4-D cycle is merely a framework to channel this philosophy during an organisational change process. As demonstrated by the facilitators, it is perfectly possible to guide an AI change process without including the 4-D cycle.

Joep indicated that he notices a shift in importance from the 4-D cycle to the underlying principles of AI. The facilitators expressed that over the years, these principles embedded within their own approach and attitude. They indicate that they live them without actually thinking about or naming them during the process. This suggests that, for the facilitator, embodying these principles during the process is an important factor to successfully realize the desired change. During the interviews, a lot of emphases was placed on the constructionist principle. All the facilitators explained their

focus on the words they use to construct the right questions. This study, once more, reveals the power of questions to change the perspective one has on their own past, present and future.

By reflecting upon the facilitators on seven different levels, using an approach inspired by Korthagen's (2014) onion model, this research does introduce a new perspective on what goes on in the body and mind of a successful AI change facilitator. It is to be concluded that the facilitator's success does not come from his/her knowledge or abilities, it comes from the attitude, mindset, and beliefs he/she carries in his/her role as facilitator, all of which are a product of his/her mission and core qualities. During the process, all the layers of reflection strongly resonate with the philosophy behind AI, which is another piece of evidence that there is more to AI than the method and the technique. For some of the facilitators, AI is decisive for their personality, it is in their genes, it seems to be tailored to fit their thoughts. For others, AI is certainly a part of how they see the world and how they think, but they are keen on staying close to themselves. But in one way, shape or form, all of the facilitators *are* one with AI. The research suggests part of the personal reflection of a successful AI practitioner looks as follows; (7)*Environment*: The process and all the stakeholders. (6)*Competencies*: Competencies are not essential but can be handy. Basic knowledge about the 4-D Cycle and the principles helps the facilitator understand what is happening and enables him/her to utilize the methods more effectively. (5)*Role*: A coach, a guide, a counsellor and a friend. (4)*Attitude*: Being open-minded without prejudice, living the principles, being appreciative towards

negativity, adopting a student mindset. (3)*Beliefs*: There is always something positive, appreciate what comes up before judging, believing in the philosophy of AI. (2)*Mission*: Inquiring into the best of what is and appreciating whatever comes up to learn and develop together, while using the qualities of people and organisations as leverage to realise a collectively desirable change. (1)*Core Qualities*: Connecting (with) people, feeling the needs of the moment and the people. Let it be known that these reflectional elements are far from the only elements in each of the reflections of the participants, these merely reflect the parallels. Every person has their own identity and as stated multiple times during the research, staying close to one's identity is crucial for the interconnection and trust between the parties involved.

In line with the personal reflection of the successful AI facilitator, the influence that he/she has on the outcome of the process is also embedded in the process architecture. Each of the facilitators indicated that they have some sort of (1) preparation at hand when they start a new process. This allows them to be freer during the process itself and makes sure that the expectations are clear to all involved parties. When the preparation is finished and the time has come, the AI summit can start. The facilitators indicate that several things have a positive impact on the outcome of their processes. In their experience, it is important to (2) get the whole system in the room, meaning that all the stakeholders are present, especially those at whom the process is aimed, but also include all the stories and experience of the participants. To include these stories and experiences, there must be an atmosphere that allows them to speak

freely. It is the job of the facilitator to (3) set an open and safe atmosphere. Part of creating this atmosphere is using appropriate language and being aware of the impact that words can have. The facilitators all (4) follow the constructionist principle throughout the entire process. Because of these factors combined, stories about what is valuable arise spontaneously. To capitalize on these opportunities for connection, the facilitators recognize that (5) holding the space is essential to make room for what is important, even if what comes up is negative. The facilitators state that (6) acknowledging and reframing negativity is crucial for the outcome. This negativity must be dealt with to (7) focus on collective dreaming about the future once more. Furthermore, being able to dive into what comes up also brings an element of tailoring to the process. If one can implement these practices successfully while (8) staying close to one's personality, the chances of a successful outcome increase. To capture and realize the breakthroughs, ideas and decisions that came out of the process, a solid (9) follow-up protocol is needed.

The practical implications that this study contributes to the current literature are an experience-based set of practices that have proven to be effective. This study emphasizes the importance of connection and trust, having a process architecture and it offers a look inside the minds of successful facilitators. This study might be valuable for the inexperienced AI practitioner that looks to improve his/her personal approach, but also for the academics that are looking to find a new perspective on Appreciative Inquiry to research into.

Opportunities for future research

As Bushe (2011) indicated, the literature about the success of AI practitioners during AI processes is still relatively scarce. As the research question of this study is a very broad one, this study inevitably lacks depth in some sections. Every theme in this study might constitute a research question of its own. Various questions can be asked about the way facilitators see Appreciative Inquiry. How effective/successful are AI practitioners that use AI only as a method or a technique? Is there a difference in effectiveness or success between AI practitioners that use AI only as a method or a technique and AI practitioners that live the philosophy and adopt it as a way of life? To what extent does adopting the AI philosophy in one's life impacts the way one lives? These questions are all still unanswered and very interesting to supplement the findings of this study.

When looking at the theme of who and what influences the outcome of the process, there are opportunities as well. One can ask the question to what extent the facilitator/organisation influences the outcome of the process, what exactly influences it and/or how that can be used for the better of the process? This opens the door to questions about what kind of organisations have a higher chance of successfully realising the desired outcome of the process, or how long this success is generally sustained and how to sustain it for longer. How does the connection between the various parties influence the outcome of the process? What are the best ways to generate trust/involvement during these processes? How can you get the leadership team on the same page as the facilitators?

Regarding the process architecture, there is still an entire world to explore. One might look into the preparation, what is a good preparation, to what extent does one have to prepare the process to still be free to elaborate on what comes up? Are there any best practices with regards to preparation? Is there a superior way to approach the process? Which methods and techniques generally produce the best outcome? How does one set the right atmosphere for an AI process? To what extent does the atmosphere influence the outcome of the process? What does a good follow-up look like? How long should the follow-up last? What is the ideal duration of an AI change process? How long should the AI change facilitator be involved with the process? To what extent should the facilitator be involved? Although many articles have been written about the shadow dimension of Appreciative Inquiry, this also leaves room to inquire into the more practical aspects of coping with negativity during the process.

Lastly, since the subject of reflection on the environment, competencies, role, attitude, beliefs, mission and core qualities of the facilitator is new to the current literature, this provides us with a plethora of possible research questions regarding each layer of reflection. Every layer on its own can be inquired into as an independent subject. A lot still has to be explored before we can confidently make any decisive conclusions about these aspects. Some example questions for future research are; What core qualities must an AI practitioner embody to be successful at their craft? What exactly is the role of the AI facilitator during the AI process? What is the mission behind the AI practitioner? What are his/her values? What drives him/her? How does a successful AI

practitioner behave before/during/after the AI process? To what extent does the AI philosophy influence the day-to-day behaviour of the AI practitioner? What are the beliefs of an AI practitioner? How do the beliefs of an AI practitioner influence the outcome of the process? These are all questions that we have yet to answer.

An abundance of interesting research topics emerges from this study. I hope that this research might spark a new interest in Appreciative Inquiry and show that the literature about the topic is far from saturated. I hope this study can be the kick-start of a new wave of research in a quest to determine the profile of the successful AI practitioner.

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APPENDICES

A. Interview Guide

Conversation starter topics:

Experience (number of years in AI field)

Education

AI training

Tell me about the most successful Appreciative Inquiry processes that you guided.

How did you feel during the process?

How did the participants feel?

Were there any specific things that you did before or during the process?

According to you, which three factors played the biggest role in the successful implementation of these particular AI processes?

Is there anything at all that you would change about your approach if you were to do it again today?

Do you think that these processes would be equally successful if they were to be guided by someone else? What are the reasons for your answer?

How much of an influence does the AI facilitator/consultant have on the success of the process?

How much of an influence does the subject organization have on the success of the process? What are the determinants of this success?

How would you describe your style as an AI facilitator/consultant?

Out of all the information available about AI, what knowledge do you consider to be most important for your success as an AI facilitator/consultant?

Are there any particular methods or practices that you prefer over all others?

Do you, and if so, how do you incorporate the underlying principles of AI during the process?

Have you ever added (or tried to add) new theories, concepts, models or principles during the AI process? Can you elaborate on this?

How do you guide groups through the process?

How do you stimulate the participants to actively engage in the process?

How do you guide the group in order to get them to ask the right questions?

How do you cope with a firm's weaknesses during the AI process? Is there a "right" way to handle negativity during the process?

According to you, what makes you successful as an AI facilitator/consultant?

What are the most important personal strengths you bring to AI practice?

According to you, what is the meaning of the term "competencies"?

Which of your competencies do you consider to be most valuable?

What is your attitude towards the AI process? How is your mindset before, during and after the process?

Which competencies must an AI facilitator/consultant master in order to be capable to successfully guide an AI process?

Do you believe that any "healthy and spiritually grounded" individual with a positive attitude can successfully facilitate an AI process? What are the reasons for your answer?

If you were to set up a questionnaire for AI facilitators/consultants in order to discover how Appreciative Inquiry can be successfully implemented to facilitate organizational change, what would be the most important question in that questionnaire?

Are there any other elements about this topic that we should explore?

Is there anything important about this topic that I forgot to ask you about?