Organization Development and Change in 21st Century
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Lecture – 15
Appreciative Inquiry – Positive Turn of OD

In this session we are going to look at Appreciative Inquiry, it is a positive turn of Organization Development. How is it a positive turn?

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If we look at the general conversation in the field of OD and the language of consulting in the field of organization development or management of change, we will see some common things such as locating the problem, work towards desired change, and addressing the gap between where a system is and where it should be.

So, terms like diagnosis intervention suggest that OD and management of change are about solving issues and challenges. If we look at the sessions till now and if we analyze the general nature of conversation and tone, it looks like as if there are problems and management of change is about addressing those problems.

So, if we stretch this language further, these terms sound as if organizations are problems to be solved and management of change or organization development is a method of solving problems.

AI: An Alternative to Deficit Based Approach

- AI approach is strength based, instead of deficit based and problematizing the change process. It looks at organizations NOT as problem to be solved but a miracle to embrace.
- In this way it is succeeding many of the traditional analytic models in business and society.

However, there can be an alternative way of looking at the whole thing. So, AI (Appreciative Inquiry) is a change in that tone of management of change and OD, it is an approach which is strength based, Instead of deficit based and problematizing the change process, it looks at organizations not as problems to be solved, but miracles to be embraced. When it was first proposed in late 80s, this was seen and still it is recognized as a path breaking change in the field of organization development. Very few changes happen in the social sciences or the field of management which are of this much significance.
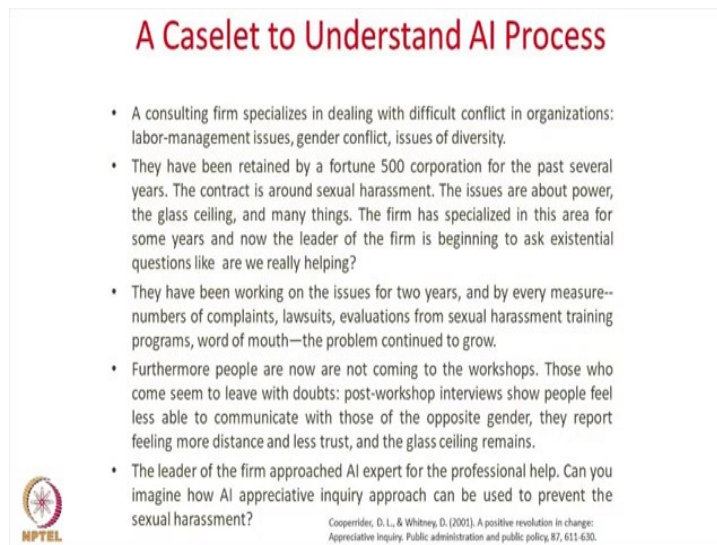
This is because, this approach looks at the whole enterprise of OD and management of change in a different way. So, it is replacing many of the traditional analytical models in business and society.

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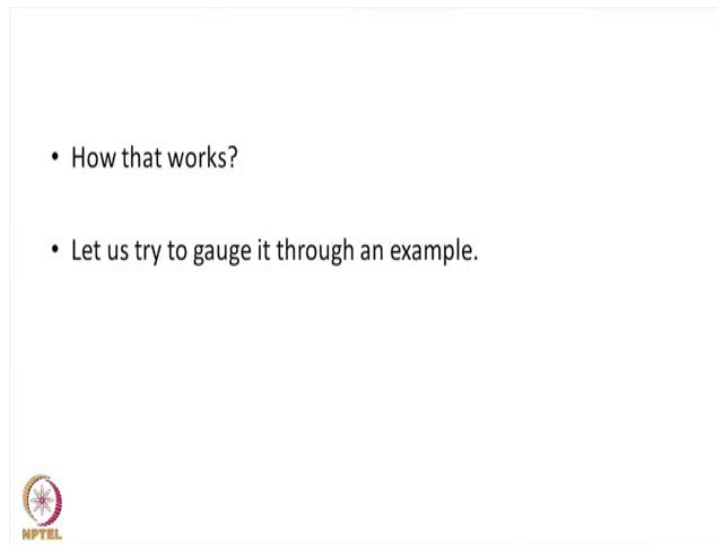
 How that works? So, let us take an example. Like most of the sessions we start with a small situation.

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Basically, appreciative inquiry is about looking at the positives and converting the situations in positive propositions. Instead of looking at problems we look at the possibilities in this process. So, through a case let us will try to understand it.

So, this case is about a consulting firm, which specializes in dealing with difficult conflict in organizations, labor management issues, gender conflicts and issues of

diversity. This case is not my personal experience unlike many cases which we have discussed till now, this is drawn from the famous paper of the David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney in public administration and public policy journal. We will talk about the founder of the AI approach also.

Cooperrider is one of the founders of appreciative inquiry. So, there is this consulting firm which specializes in dealing with the difficult conflict in organizations. This consulting firm is retained by a Fortune 500 corporation for the past several years. The contract is around sexual harassment, the issues are about power, the glass ceiling and many things related to sexual harassment.

The firm has specialized in this area for some years and now the leader of a of the firm is beginning to ask existential questions like - are we really helping the organization. They are working with this organization for so, many years on this field and here is an existential question. So, they have been working on the issues for 2 years and every year the number of complaints, lawsuits, evaluation from the sexual harassment training programs, word of mouth – the problem continue to grow.
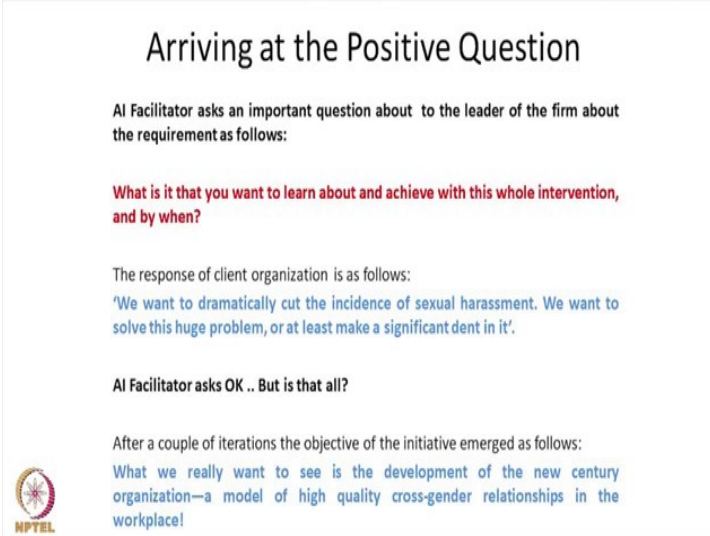
And this must be a puzzling thing for a firm which has a specialized knowledge in this field, and they do not see the impact of their work. So, people are now not coming to the workshops, those who come, seem to leave with doubts; post workshop interview show that people feel less able to communicate with those of the opposite gender. They report feeling more distance and less trust, and the glass ceiling remains.

The leader of the firm approached AI expert and in this field the founder of the AI process himself, for professional help. Can you imagine how AI appreciative inquiry approach can be used to prevent the sexual harassment at workplace? This situation covers all the right things which any logical person will be doing from the paradigm of problem solving.

They have identified the problem, they have identified that training and development is important, they have identified that people have to be sensitized about it, people must be communicated the importance and criticality of this issue and how to handle that in spite of all these there is no positive sign. And here is the AI approach that says that do not look at problem look at possibilities.

Can you imagine how you can use this logic of appreciation and looking at possibilities in this situation? So, how to look at the possibilities in this situation?

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Here is a snapshot of the conversation. AI facilitator asks an important question to the leader of the firm about the requirement: What is it that you want to learn about and achieve with this whole intervention and by when? What do you want to achieve?

That is a simple question asked. What would you imagine, would be the answer of the client?
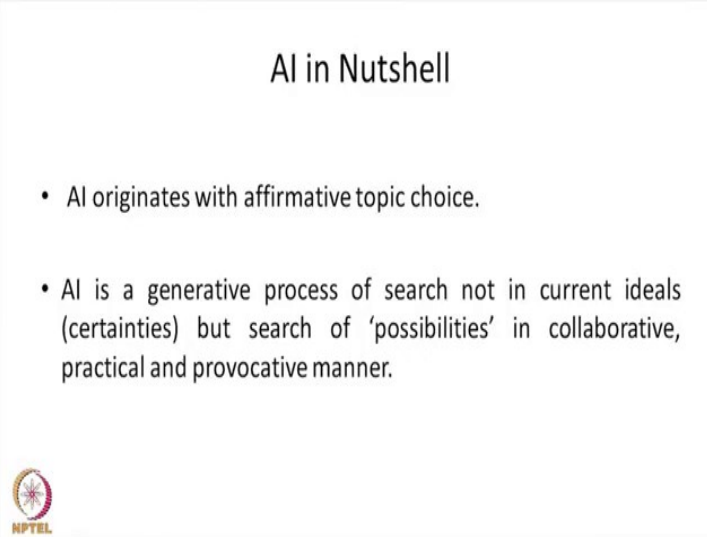
The response of the client is as follows. We want to dramatically cut the incidence of the sexual harassment and we want to solve this huge problem or at least make a significant dent in it. We want to solve this problem. That is a very straightforward requirement and they have data as well because in last 2 years they know the severity of the problem. They know specific pockets in terms of the geography or in terms of cadre, where this problem is more prevalent.

They want to at least make a significant dent in it. After this point the major change in the shift in the conversation happens. So, facilitator ask, ok, but is that all? You just want to solve the problem, or can you think about something else in the same domain? After few iterations, what came out was the answer from the client and the answer was what

we really want to see is the development of the new century organization, a model of high quality cross gender relationships in the workplace.

So, you can see instead of looking at the situation as a problem, they have now shifted the conversation towards the possibilities. We want to see a new century organization which has high quality cross gender relationships. So, this is a glimpse of the process where we look at a situation from the perspective of possibilities. So, AI originates with an affirmative topic choice.

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AI in Nutshell

- AI originates with affirmative topic choice.

- AI is a generative process of search not in current ideals (certainties) but search of 'possibilities' in collaborative, practical and provocative manner.

In the previous example if the sexual harassment is the situation they want to address, the choice of the topic is not about the problem it is about the possibilities. Though it is in the same theme, but instead of calling it sexual harassment, if we shift our conversation around good functional cross gender relationship, then we have given a positive turn to the whole conversation.

Secondly, AI is a generative process of search - a search of the possibilities and that happens not as a top down approach but happens with a collaborative, practical and provocative manner. Many a time we will see in the AI hundreds and thousands of people are involved in these conversations, How does it happen and what are the principles behind it - that is what we are going to look at in today's session.

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Who propounded this approach? David Cooperrider. David Cooperrider was the student of Prof. Surendra Srivastava in the Case Western University in Cleveland and while working in the Cleveland hospital with the doctors, David put forward the idea that the whole perspective about management of change in organization development can be shifted towards positive tone and that became his thesis - it became a world famous thesis.

Prof. Srivastava died few years ago, but David Cooperrider continued to work in the field of AI and has influenced hundreds of organizations across the world. Two years ago, I have had the opportunity of attending his workshop. We are doing some work together in the field of positive change business as agent for positive change.

AI Process

- Appreciative Inquiry is a collaborative, collective and applied search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant aspects of their surroundings.

- It begins with a discovery of what gives "life" to a system when it is at its best.

- AI revolves around well crafted questions those lead a system to awaken and heighten its positive potential. It may or generally involves hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.

AI process is an inquiry. It is a collaborative, collective and applied search for the best in people in their organization and the relevant aspect of their surroundings. It begins with the discovery of what gives life to a system when it is at its best. AI revolves around well-crafted questions. So, the important component of AI are well crafted questions because they direct the conversation and in turn create reality in organizations.

So, AI revolves around well-crafted questions that lead a system to awaken and heighten its positive potential. It generally involves hundreds or sometime even thousands of people.
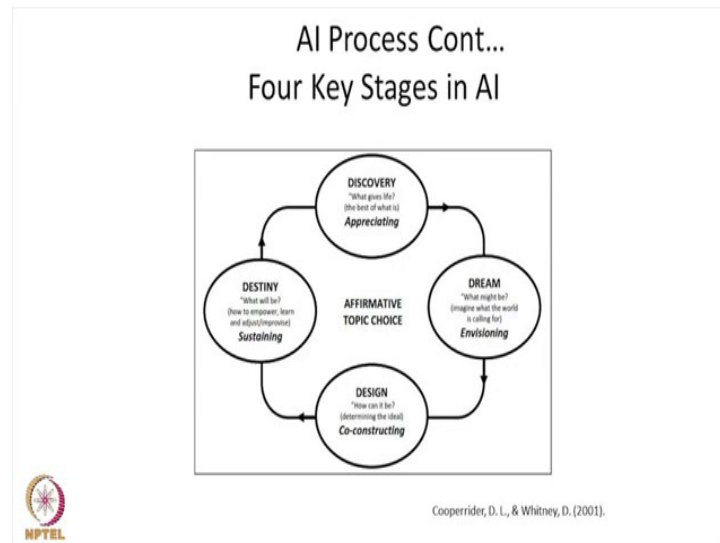
AI process goes through the four key stages, the first stage is called discovery. The key question in the discovery phase is - what gives life the best of what is it is about appreciating? As I mentioned before, we do not look at organizations or human system as problems to be solved, but as miracles to be embraced.

So, the conversation does not start with - what are the problems? Conversation starts with - what is giving life to the system?

In spite of the limitations, we are concerned about this question – what are the life giving forces? What is positive? What is sustaining this system? When an individual feels great being part of this system? So, these are the kind of questions with which the appreciative inquiry starts, and this phase is called discovery phase.

Discovery phase leads to dream. A dream phase is governed and directed with one key question. Imagine what the world is calling for. So, when I talk about what is giving life, when I talk about the possibilities, when I talk about the positives in the system the individual mind and collective mind is ready to look at what we can be. An individual mind or collective mind entrenched in the problem entrenched with the challenges and not in the possibilities cannot dream.

For a system to dream collectively, naturally the mind has to be linked to the potentials and possibilities and the life giving things and the best aspect of the system. So, that is

why the dream is the second phase. This is a collective process and it is collaborative process. People compile in the small groups. Then smaller groups present that to the larger group and the large group reaches to a collective dream. They reach to the collective dream without worrying about how it will happen, how will they get the resources etcetera. They just focus on the dream.

In the dreaming stage we use analogies, colors, pictures, graphics more than the language and words because these things unleash our creativity and vision.

After dream phase comes the design phase. That is where the conversation happens about how the dream can be simply stated in organizational context. This phase is about how systems and processes can help us to realize this dream.

After the design phase, the destiny phase comes. This phase is about how to empower, learn, adjust or improvise. This is also about how to realize and to put up the systems and processes that have been identified in the design phase. In earlier days, destiny phase used to be called delivery, but later on the word delivery was changed to destiny because in a way in this stage you are writing your own destiny because you are creating reality based on your collective and provocative vision for yourself and for the system.

So, these are the four key stages in AI and that is why it is called Four D process.

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AI Process Cont...
Four Key Stages in AI

- Discovery— mobilizing a whole system inquiry into the positive and life giving forces and features;

- Dream—creating a clear results-oriented vision in relation to discovered potential and in relation to questions of higher purpose, i.e., "What we can become?"

- Design—creating provocative propositions of the ideal organization, i.e. "What systems and processes can help us to realize our dream?"

- Destiny—strengthening the capability of the whole system creating processes for learning, adjustment, and improvisation, formation of the groups around provocative proposition, deciding on who will do what and when.

In the discovery phase we mobilize the whole system inquiry into positive and the life giving forces and features. In the dream phase we create a clear result oriented vision in relation to discovery potential and relate to the question of higher purpose - what we can become.

Design phase is about creating provocative propositions of the ideal organization. That is which systems and processes can help us to realize our dream. Destiny phase is about strengthening the capability of the whole system, creating processes for learning, adjustment, improvisation formation of the groups around provocative propositions and deciding on, who will do what and when.

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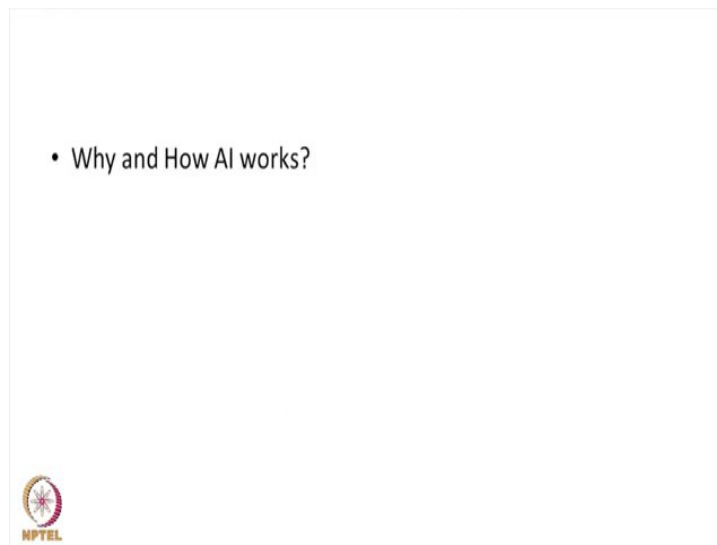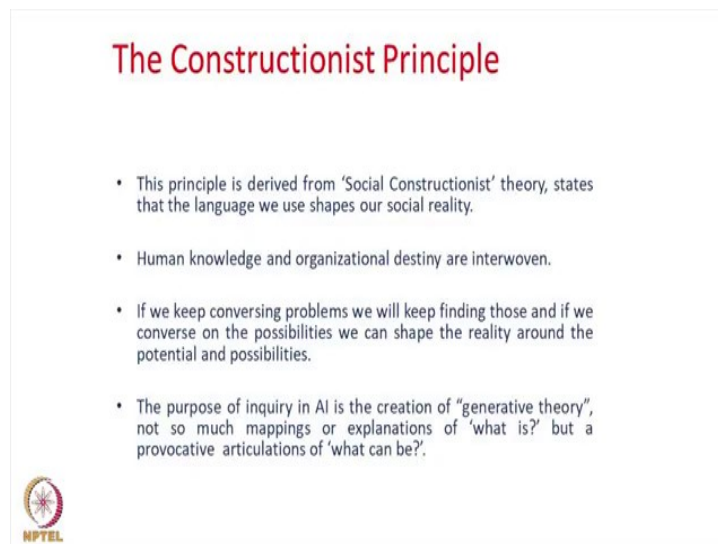

The question is why this thing works and how it works? When we present the apparent form of AI, it looks simple. Sometimes it sounds simplistic as well - how simple things like turning the process of inquiry towards the possibilities can work. It works in a deeper individual and collective psychological ways. So, there are certain principles which are behind the success of the AI process.

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Basic Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

- The Constructionist Principle
- The Principle of Simultaneity
- The Poetic Principle
- The Anticipatory Principle
- The Positive Principle

These principles are called constructionist principle, principle of simultaneity, poetic principle, anticipatory principle and positive principle we will look at these principles one by one.

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The Constructionist Principle

- This principle is derived from 'Social Constructionist' theory, states that the language we use shapes our social reality.
- Human knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven.
- If we keep conversing problems we will keep finding those and if we converse on the possibilities we can shape the reality around the potential and possibilities.
- The purpose of inquiry in AI is the creation of "generative theory", not so much mappings or explanations of 'what is?' but a provocative articulations of 'what can be?'.

Constructionist principle arises from the basic tenet of the human reality and that is human reality is socially constructed. There is no reality out there. We create our reality through our conversations and perceptions.

Gergen is the great scholar who first talked about the social constructionist view in a very systematic and powerful way and AI operates on the constructionist principle. If we apply the social constructionist view, social construction of reality perspective in the organizational context; that means, human knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven. As you start knowing about the system, you are able to create that kind of system.

If we keep conversing about problems we will keep having problems and we keep solving them and we will keep operating from the deficit mindset, but if we start conversation about the possibilities, we can shape the reality around the potentials and possibilities.

It does not mean that it overlooks the problem, but the conversation about the possibilities and potential overpowers and addresses the larger problem that is how the constructionist view is applied and works in the AI process.

The purpose of inquiry in AI is the creation of generative theory. It means theory is not given from outside. Theory about organization, about a situation, about a challenge is not supplied from outside. We can create new theory around new conversations which is on the potentials and the possibilities. The purpose is not to map or provide explanation of what it is, but a provocative articulation of what can be.

So, that is how the constructionist principle works and that is that makes the AI process successful.

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The Principle of Simultaneity

- Inquiry and change are not truly separate moments, but are simultaneous.
- The intervention starts with inquiry itself.
- The seeds of change are implicit in the very first questions we ask.
- The 'question' directs the people to think and talk about, the things people discover and learn. The question inspire images of the future determined.
- The questions we ask set the stage for what we "find", and what we "discover" (the data) becomes the linguistic material out of which the future is conceived, conversed about, and constructed.

Second principle is simultaneity. Simultaneity principle in a very simple term says that inquiry and change are not truly separate moments. You can reflect about your own situation. The moment we start inquiring about our potential and possibilities the change will start. Same is the case with organizational system.

If in an organizational system you start an inquiry about the change and possibilities, change naturally begins. So, in a way we can say intervention starts with inquiry itself. The seeds of change are implicit in the very first question we ask. If I ask question how I address the sexual harassment problem in the organization, I will be open to some type of intervention and certain type of conversation. When I shift the question, when I replace this question with another question that is about how as an organization we can have a very functional and joyful cross gender conversations and cross gender relations, we will open up to a different kind of intervention. So, the very question directs the people to think and talk about the things that people discover and the questions can inspire images of the future.
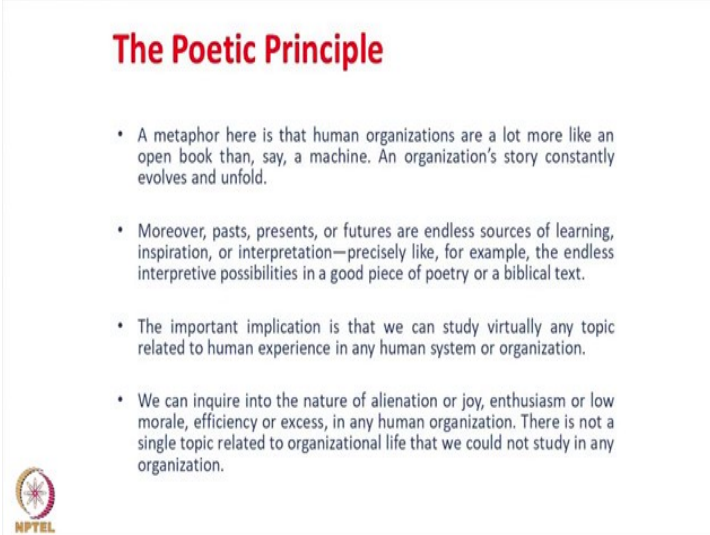
So, the question has the potential to inspire the future. In Hindi heartland there is a common question asked about society, about the individual by some elders at times when they are not very appreciative of those kids, the question is - what will happen to you and the very question leads to a negative spiral that we cannot handle few things.

So, I cannot handle this. So, naturally I will be worse in that as well. In my school days one topic in the allocation competition used to be very popular Bharat ki dasha and invariably whenever we would talk about Bharat ki dasha the topic like this we would start talking about Bharat ki durdasha. So, this is the power of the question - the tone and the direction of the inquiry is set by the question.

The questions we ask, set the stage for what we would find and discover. Question decides which is the kind of data we look at and that data becomes the linguistic material out of which the future is conceived, conversed and constructed. So, future is not given. We can create the future - that is what we hear very often. But the main question is how to create the future and that how to go about creating future of or in an organization?

How a new future which is joyful, which we all dream of, can be created in the organization, where hundreds of people are involved, without unleashing their positivity? For that we need to have appropriate question and if we use the appropriate question, that can help organizations to create, conceive and construct the future that is how the principle of simultaneity works in the AI process.

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The Poetic Principle

- A metaphor here is that human organizations are a lot more like an open book than, say, a machine. An organization's story constantly evolves and unfold.

- Moreover, pasts, presents, or futures are endless sources of learning, inspiration, or interpretation—precisely like, for example, the endless interpretive possibilities in a good piece of poetry or a biblical text.

- The important implication is that we can study virtually any topic related to human experience in any human system or organization.

- We can inquire into the nature of alienation or joy, enthusiasm or low morale, efficiency or excess, in any human organization. There is not a single topic related to organizational life that we could not study in any organization.

Poetic principle. Poetic principle says that organizations are more like poetry and less like machine. Machine has a definitive functionality. Once machine is installed and created, it has a specific functionality, but poetry is a constant process, poetry can move in any direction.

So, like a poetry, the organization's story can also constantly evolve and unfold. Unlike non-living systems, organization is a living system and the reality of the organization or organizations story can constantly evolve; that means, past present and future are endless source of the learning, inspiration or interpretations. It is quite like the endless interpretive possibilities in good piece of poetry or a biblical text. We look at our scriptures or biblical text, same story similar story can be interpreted in hundreds of ways.

Text is open for interpretation in different ways and that can work for different people. In the same way organizational reality is also not fixed. It can be interpreted in multiple ways. We need to be awakened to that possibilities and AI awakens that possibility. That is why this principle is called poetic principle. The important implication is that we can study virtually any topic related to human experience in any human system or organization.

Here David Cooperrider gives an example that while working in a social development organization during the discovery phase when a question was asked what makes you feel best and when do you feel best being part of this organization and doing your work? People said that they feel joy when they see, they are able to make some positive change in others' life - that kind of answer can come from executives of business organizations as well.

When you see that your work is making difference, a positive difference to the world, you experience a different kind of joy, but in the management scholarship there is not much literature on executive joy in the organization behavior course. They might not have come across a topic like executive joy, but joy is an important part of your work experience. Wont it be wonderful if people start experiencing joy at workplace and management start gearing up to create joy at work.

So, if management is geared up and HR function is geared up not only towards creating commitment, but creating joy at work, you can imagine that the kind of system being developed, the kind of policies being adopted, the kind of workplace you arrange all will be very different. So, what poetic principle says is that do not worry about whether the topic is there in the conventional management text or not. You connect with your
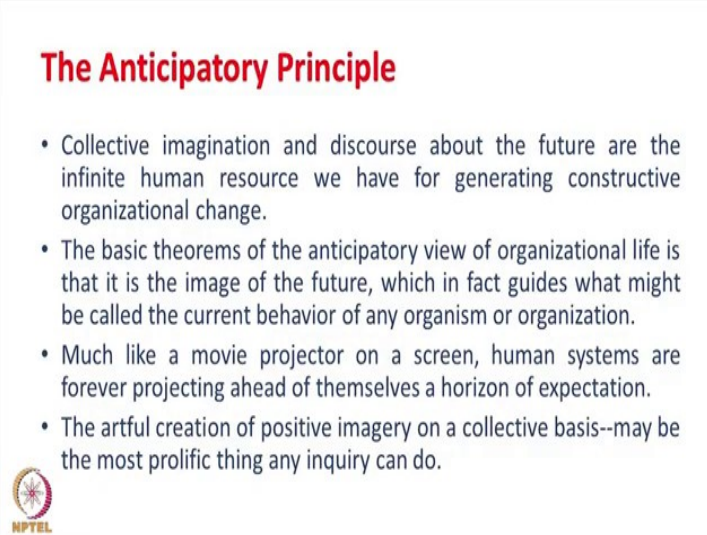
experience and if you want to continue that experience you can create reality even if it is not there and well documented in a conventional literature in literature and management.

So, we can inquire into the nature of alienation or joy, enthusiasm or low morale, efficiency, or excess, in any human organization. There is not a single topic related to organizational life that we could not study in any organization.

We now come to anticipatory principle.

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Anticipatory principle says that collective imagination and discourse about the future are the infinite human resources; that we have for generating the constructive organizational change.

We all talk about resources; organizations pursue to acquire resources to create and develop future. The anticipatory principle says that collective imagination and collective discourse are the most powerful resources. Our usual understanding is that main resources are manpower, material, machine, money etcetera. Anticipatory principle says that the greatest resources are the collective imagination and discourse. This is also very effectively used in AI process.

So, the basic theorem of anticipatory view of the organizational life is that it is the image of the future which in fact, guides the current behavior of any organism or organization. So, similar to this projector, which is projecting the slides on the screen, human system

keeps projecting its future through its ongoing conversation and the same logic is applied at the organizational level.

So, organizational imagination and organizational discourse keep projecting its future on the canvas of reality and that is the greatest resource. If we change the conversation, if we direct the conversations towards possibilities and the potentials, we will create that kind of future, we will not create we will project that kind of future what this anticipatory principle says that people in organization behave as per their anticipation of the organization.

If I anticipate this organization to be great, my behavior will align towards that greatness. If I anticipate this organization to be normal and mediocre, then my behavior particularly about the organization and within the organization will also be mediocre. So, if we unleash the collective imagination and discourse which is geared up towards the possibilities, we will project the possibilities.

In my current behavior, in current conversation, the seed of the future is embedded. Future is not out there; it is right here in my conversation and in my individual and collective imagination - that is the beautiful poetic principle. So, the artful creation of the positive imagery or a collective basis may be the most prolific thing in inquiry we can do.

These are the descriptions of these principles. These principles have origin in the social sciences, not in the management. In some other fields of social sciences, they are being beautifully used. AI is an approach that works because these are the principles which govern the human imagination, human enterprise, collective human enterprise in terms of creating their reality.

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Does this Works?

So many real life stories are published in the journal AI
Practitioner, and Appreciative Inquiry Handbook.

Few Indian examples are business corporations
(Nicholas Piramal, ACG Worldwide), Civic group
(Imagine Nagaland, Youth For Peace) etc.

Our personal experience with education institutions
(KIIT, ICT, Walchand College), Corporates (Nokia
Siemens, Citec Engineering, SciTech Centre),

Now, a question might be raised that this sounds a bit idealistic. Can it work? Many real life stories are published in the journal AI Practitioner. So, AI Practitioner is a regular journal where the leading practitioners of the AI and facilitators of AI contributing the great stories. Hundreds and thousands of organizations are being benefited by this approach, whether government organizations, commercial organizations, private organizations or developmental organizations.

Cooperrider and Surendra Srivastava decided to publish their work in the form of a book and they decided to publish in a very reputed journal - one of the most reputed journal in the field of management. Their paper was almost accepted and a very renowned management scholar who was the editor of the journal said that, your paper is of the 60 pages I will be happy to publish this paper if you convert that into a 35 pages document. That was the time and this message was coming from a the most reputed journal in the field of management.

Cooperrider and Srivastava decided against following this advice they decided not to publish in the journal, but to publish an even larger discourse and more elaborate process of AI in the form of the book series. They published it and they got invitation from the UNO to apply this process in the multinational meetings where very responsible policy makers from hundreds of countries participate.

This is the impact of this process. In appreciative inquiry handbook, there are dozens of cases, real life cases that are very well documented and have worked in many organizations. There are many organizations in India as well where they have used the process of AI, they have applied the AI approach and have benefited.

Nicholas Piramal is a case study, ACG Worldwide is again a example where I have had a opportunity of implementing the OD process with the AI approach. Many civic groups like Imagine Nagaland, Youth For Peace they are the huge organizations thousands of people are involved and they are significantly benefited by AI based intervention.

My personal experience with the educational institutions like KIIT in Bhubaneswar, ICT, Matunga various forums at IIT Bombay, corporates like Nokia Siemens, Citec, SciTech centre, government departments – there I had the opportunity of directing the OD process with the AI approach.

With these documents and experiences of many other practitioners and my personal experience, we can confidently say that AI process works. What is important is the right approach and if we apply this approach in the true sense AI works, irrespective of the context, irrespective of the nature of the organization we work on it.