

“Link the energy of the core directly to any change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized.”

Stavros, Cooperrider, and Kelley – Case Western Reserve University

Rapid Strategy Development . . . Get Engagement and Results Quicker

An October, 2008 *Management Forum Series* presentation by

Tony Silbert

Synopsis by Rod Cox

*“For many, traditional approaches to strategy development begin with an analysis of external and internal factors, followed by some visioning, then planning. Included in the analysis is often a ‘SWOT’, a thorough examination of internal Strengths and Weaknesses, as well as external Opportunities and Threats. SWOTs are praised for capturing both the positive and negative, and organizations embrace this approach with the hope of gaining a ‘balanced’ analysis of itself, inside and out. By exploring the weaknesses and threats, however, organizations often cause more harm than good. Gaping canyons and immovable mountains emerge, giving way to downward-spiraling feeling of hopeless and fear . . . highlighting what **isn’t** desired, and carrying little momentum to inspire a compelling vision of a **most** desired future.”*

To be successful, any organization’s strategy needs to be clearly visible and trust-producing, built and maintained on clear communication, an involvement by everyone who will be impacted, development by leaders as executive sponsors, cross-sectional involvement, a translation to “user” language, a commitment to dynamic attention and improvement, and regular feedback to all of the stakeholders. This is the promise of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), grounded by two deceptively simple concepts:

- (1) ***What you see, you find more of.*** The more positive and inspiring the strategy development process, the more likely that innovative ideas will be created and possibilities explored.
- (2) ***People commit to what they help to create.*** The more participative the plan creation, the more committed people are to implementation success.“

In this presentation, Tony Silbert introduces SOAR, a dynamic, highly effective, highly participatory accelerated AI-based strategic development approach that *“links the energy of the core directly to any change agenda,”* and is being used with great success by organizations as diverse as government, not-for-profit, and small-medium-large private companies.

Tony Silbert holds an MS in Organizational Development from American University. He and his wife, Jan Hetzel Silbert, are co-founders of Innovation Partners International. For nearly 20 years, 15 of which were in the international arena, Silbert’s focus has been organizational development, change leadership, strategic planning, training design and delivery, and teambuilding. He is currently Dean for the NTL/Case Western Reserve’s part of the Appreciative Inquiry Certification Process, and Instructor of the AI and Strategy workshop.

In this Management Forum, Silbert’s savvy command of large group facilitation was clear, especially his skill at asking for and interweaving attendee responses into the fabric of his presentation. This synopsis includes many of these responses as well as quotes from Silbert’s PowerPoint and from *“SOARing from SWOT: Four Lessons Every Strategic Plan Must Know,”* co-written with Jan Hetzel Silbert. Research material includes *“Strategic Inquiry → Appreciative Intent: Inspiration to SOAR A New Framework for Strategic Planning”* by Jacqueline Stavros, David Cooperrider and D. Lynn Kelley.

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First, let's distinguish strategy from tactics. Strategy is the start. It's ***what you plan to do***, often defined in longer 3-5 year terms such as mission, vision, values, goals, objectives. Tactics are ***how you plan to do it***, usually expressed in shorter 1-2 year plans for operational groups like human resource, operations, finance, and so forth. The focus of this presentation is on strategy; more specifically, on the value of strategic plans that develop a novel, successful future faster and with significantly improved engagement by everyone who is impacted by the strategy.

When Silbert quizzed the attendees about the desired outcomes of strategy development in their own organizations, he heard these hopes:

- translating strategy into action items
- rapid results
- gaining employee feedback as well as buy-in from all of the stakeholders
- maintaining adequate time to develop strategy before diving into action; i.e., putting the 'what' before the 'how'
- making strategic planning an ongoing forum, not a periodic event
- connecting strategic planning to the budget/financial processes
- staying “on plan” rather than moving on to other things
- maintaining successful strategic planning in a scenario that could shift rapidly because of marketplace changes or other disruptions that cannot be controlled.

At table talks (6-8 attendees per table) it was clear that these hopes were not being met in most organizations. The attendees talked about environments characterized by a “limited effort by senior management absent the input of the people who would be impacted by it.” . . . “Organizational energy is being wasted internally on issues of buy-in, commitment and implementation.” . . . “The strategic promise is not being met.”

Emerging Trends in Strategy:

From a historical perspective, strategy emerged from the military arena. For rulers and military leaders like Ghengis Khan and Julius Caesar, strategy involved winning conflicts, conquering territories and people, and crushing the competition. Even in more modern times, industrial leaders employed this strategic approach. But the beat-the-other-team focus began changing in the 1970s and 1980s when persuasive new approaches to strategy came into the picture, for the most part piggy-backing on the older models.

Some of the more notable and valuable of these models are Management-By-Objective, the Quality Movement, Mission/Vision/Values, Six Sigma, Virtual Integration, Value Chain Analysis, and so forth. But *“almost all strategic planning processes contain the ‘old standby’ of completing a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, or its counterpart TOWS (threats, opportunities, weaknesses, and strengths) analysis.”* (Stavros, Cooperrider, and Kelley)

A further shift moved the focus from competition to creation; i.e., on creating a strategic plan from which tactical initiatives could be developed and implemented. It is a more holistic, inclusive model, and yet it also features high engagement from senior leadership, and low engagement from the workforce. (This has been described as three weeks involvement by executives to define the strategy, three days

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involvement by middle managers to decide how to roll it out; and at the end of the process, three hours involvement with the front line to tell them what they have to do.)

As compared to the older strategic models, this shift had limited additional success. Predictably, getting buy-in from those who are not part of planning or design has been a persistent challenge that has caused many strategic initiatives to fail, even when the original concepts are well-thought out and powerful.

This is not to say that the older approaches are bad; for example, objectives-based approaches are essential in today's business environment. But all of them have inherent limitations that limit their utility and inhibit their ability to influence positive outcomes.

Shifts in the 1990s and during the current decade have turned many of those notions on their heads. “Today, organizations are focused on execution and implementation.” . . . A central theme of the newer approaches is the value of high engagement by the workforce in both creating and implementing the plan, based on an awareness that **people commit to what they create**. Employees who are engaged in development have no need to be “bought in.” They're already there. By employing a top-middle-bottom model, the “**what you plan to do**” is blended with the “**how you plan to do it**” in a way that older strategic models could not provide, creating a competitive advantage based on unleashing a holistic culture of strategic action, learning, thinking and innovation at all levels of the organization.

But shifting to a new strategic paradigm is simpler said than done. When Silbert asked the attendees what competencies need to be in place before an organization can flip the engagement paradigm and execute it well, they responded with:

- a bias for change
- a listening culture where everyone is free to share, where feedback is welcomed, and where there is a framework for conversation
- a willingness to have strategic conversations
- trust
- an understanding of the many shareholders
- a facilitator who can effectively champion the change

Not many organizations have these attributes, and that's where the application of Appreciative Inquiry can make a fundamental difference.

What is Appreciative Inquiry (AI)?

This strengths-based approach is high on engagement:

- **Appreciate:** honor, value, respect, increase in value
- **Inquiry:** gather information with an intent to increase the parts of the organization that will increase value; i.e., energy replenishment

Silbert puts it this way, quoting Bernard J. Mohr and Jane Magruder Watkins. (For emphasis, *Executive Forum* has highlighted key words in red.)

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“AI is a **collaborative** and highly **participative, system-wide** approach to seeking, identifying, and **enhancing the ‘life-giving forces’** that are present when a system is **performing optimally in human, economic and organizational terms**”

Stavros, Cooperrider, and Kelley (*Appreciative Inquiry Commons*, Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, 2003) add some additional detail:

“AI involves the art and practice of **asking questions** that **strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential**. It centrally involves the **mobilization of inquiry involving people (throughout the organization)**. In AI, the arduous task of intervention (SWOT) gives way to the **speed of imagination and innovation (SOAR)**; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is **discovery, dream, and design**.

AI seeks to **build a constructive union** between a whole people and the massive entirety of **past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul--and visions of valued and possible futures**.

AI deliberately seeks to work from this **“positive change core,”** and it assumes that every living system has many **untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive.**”

And in last season’s Management Forum Series (May 7, 2008), Karlin Sloan described AI this way:

“Appreciative Inquiry is the use of **solution-focused questioning** to create **dialogue and learning** in individuals and groups. It is a way of looking at an individual, a team, or an organization as **a strong, capable ‘whole’ with capacities that you do not yet know**. In a traditional organization, you look for problems and then solve them. In Appreciative Inquiry, you **look for strengths, for opportunities to grow, and for the creation of what’s next**. By **focusing on what works**, you propel yourself and your organization toward a **more positive future state.**”

These are the essential strengths and approaches that are present when organizations are at their best.

- They are what we should seek out and amplify throughout our organizations.
- They are the expression of core values rather than a prescriptive overlay.
- They are the foundation for developing strategic topics to help the organization move in the most desired direction.

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SWOT meets SOAR

You are probably familiar with SWOT, a traditional analytical tool for Strategic Planning, and typically a two-to-four hour management process of assessing negative issues and determining which of them will receive primary focus. **The focus is on incremental forward movement with a particular emphasis on fixing what is wrong.** The mind set is competitive, and the perspective is one of scarcity:

- **S**trengths: *internal* attributes of the organization that are helpful to achieving the objective.
- **W**eaknesses: *internal* attributes of the organization that are harmful to achieving the objective.
- **O**pportunities: *external* conditions that are helpful to achieving the objective.
- **T**hreats: *external* conditions which could do damage to the business' performance.

	Helpful to reaching the objective	Harmful to reaching the objective
Internal Origin Attributes of the organization	S trengths: where can we outperform others?	W eaknesses: where can others outperform us? In a typical SWOT driven organization, this is where the majority of the energy is spent
External Origin Attributes of the environment	O pportunities: how might we exploit the market?	T hreats: what/who might take away our market?

SOAR, on the other hand, is based on Strategic Inquiry and Appreciative Intent, and is an ongoing **collective** process of assessing the strengths and opportunities inherent to an organization, and from which a **collective** strategic direction is derived and implemented. The mind set is cooperative and the perspective is one of abundance.

- **S**trengths: what are we really good at?
- **O**pportunities: how can we magnify and take advantage of our collective strengths?
- **A**spirations: If we could wave our magic wand . . .
- **R**esults: what can we can make tangibly possible?

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Strategic Inquiry	Strengths: what are our greatest assets?	Opportunities: what are the best possible market opportunities?
Appreciative Intent	Aspirations: what is our preferred future?	Results: what are the measurable results?

Although at first glance SWOT and SOAR may seem to be two different ways of describing the same process, there is a fundamental difference between them:

Where SWOT focuses on fixing what’s wrong, SOAR focuses on increasing what’s right as well as holistically prospecting to find and exploit strengths that will create a desired new future.

This is a BIG shift. Those who have been involved in training, psychology or management (including raising children) know that paying attention to unwanted behaviors – or unwanted organizational attributes -- can, oddly enough, reinforce them so that they thrive rather than being extinguished. Such is the dilemma of SWOT – the SOAR approach is to crowd out the negative by means of a positive, co-constructive, honorable, appreciative-based, let’s-bring-out-the-best-in-our-people-and-organization approach. By shifting the focus to desirable organizational attributes, SOAR offers a much greater opportunity to move the organization beyond the present into the future.

Need more convincing? In the following chart, note the differences between SWOT and SOAR.

SWOT focus:	SOAR focus:
▪ scarcity	▪ abundance
▪ weaknesses	▪ strengths
▪ reactive	▪ proactive
▪ fear-based	▪ opportunity-based
▪ pessimism	▪ optimism
▪ problem solving	▪ creating a future
▪ us vs. them	▪ cooperation / cooptation

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<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ remedial approach: what needs to be fixed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ magic wand approach: if there were no constraints, what would we do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ starting from a negative bias with a goal of incremental increase	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ starting from a positive bias with a goal of spiraling upward
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ analyzing the current state and determining what needs to be fixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ building on the best of the past and the possibilities of the future

Far from being a “nice” theoretical concept, SOAR has been a bottom-line tool in countless companies to help them gain significant increases in profit, production, stock price, etc. The use of SOAR has also been shown to directly affect the magnetism of companies to attract and retain top-notch talent.

So how does an organization move from SWOT to SOAR? Silbert quizzed the attendees about what they would suggest to senior management in their own organizations. Their responses:

- Create an atmosphere of trust and belief in the strategy
- Include training in SOAR methodologies, including focus groups
- Translate “executive speak” into language that everyone understands
- Use principle centered agreements as vehicles for conversations
- Make strategy communication more visible; weave it into the entire operation
- To enhance integration, communicate throughout the process to connect “here” with “there”
- Make sure a true cross-section of the organization is engaged, and that the leader is an executive sponsor
- Don’t attempt to recreate the wheel; build on the best of what has worked well before
- Draw upon the perspectives of key up-and-coming individuals in the organization to gain new perspectives. Compare these with executive management views, and address the differences.
- (Silbert) Draw from the Positive Deviants in the organization, those who excel in the current environment and are likely to operate successfully in the direction the organization wants to move, drawing others with them.
- (Silbert) Bring the right people into the room to create successful initiatives.

As in sports psychology, SOAR is the internal framework used to produce the image you want people to move to, built on the concept that **positive imaging drives positive actions**:

- **What we ask determines what we will find.**
- **What we find determines how we talk.**
- **How we talk determines how we imagine together.**
- **How we imagine determines what we achieve together.**

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In a SWOT environment, the focus would likely be on production quotas, competitive analysis, stringent policies and procedures, or perhaps “getting rid of the deadwood”; in other words, focusing negatively on what the company doesn’t want to do, and putting in safeguards.

Consider the SOAR alternative. Envision AI/SOAR as an Opportunity Tree with each component supporting the next higher one. In a well-run organization (one that uses a Positive Opportunity Tree), the roots (1) might include good management, competitive compensation, workload balance, benefits, promotional ability, the right people, empowerment, training and job satisfaction. The trunk (2) might be effective employee retention and a magnetic work environment which supports the crown (3) of the tree: stability, low turnover, productivity, job satisfaction, teamwork, business knowledge, trust, innovation and risk-taking.

By switching to a Problem Opportunity Tree, the model can also be an effective diagnostic tool. Tony shared an example where the problem – high employee turnover – was reframed using a Problem Opportunity Tree. In this case, the root (1) was a toxic work environment, bad management, and no sense of ownership, which led to a trunk (2) of high turnover, and from there to a crown (3) of loss of productivity, new employee assimilation costs, and quality/service issues.

As another example, Silbert cited British Airways’ approach to reducing lost bag issues. Initially, the focus was on service recovery: how to get lost bags to their owners more expediently, once the bags were located. But by using an Appreciative Inquiry/SOAR approach, the discussion quickly moved beyond the obvious problem to focus on a more complete approach called Exceptional Arrival Experience. Within that context, the idea morphed and eventually included a provision for shower facilities for business passengers arriving in London after a red-eye flight from the States. (Interestingly, the AI/SOAR participants were bedded in conventional semi-reclining airline seats overnight to better understand what an Exceptional Arrival Experience might mean from a tired passenger’s perspective.)

Getting Started: The Appreciate Inquiry “5-I” Process.

To facilitate high-engagement and strengths-focused strategic planning, Silbert concluded his presentation by providing a three-day template (to be preceded by an initial senior-level Summit) to get the AI/SOAR process engaged and started, drawn from his successful work with many companies.

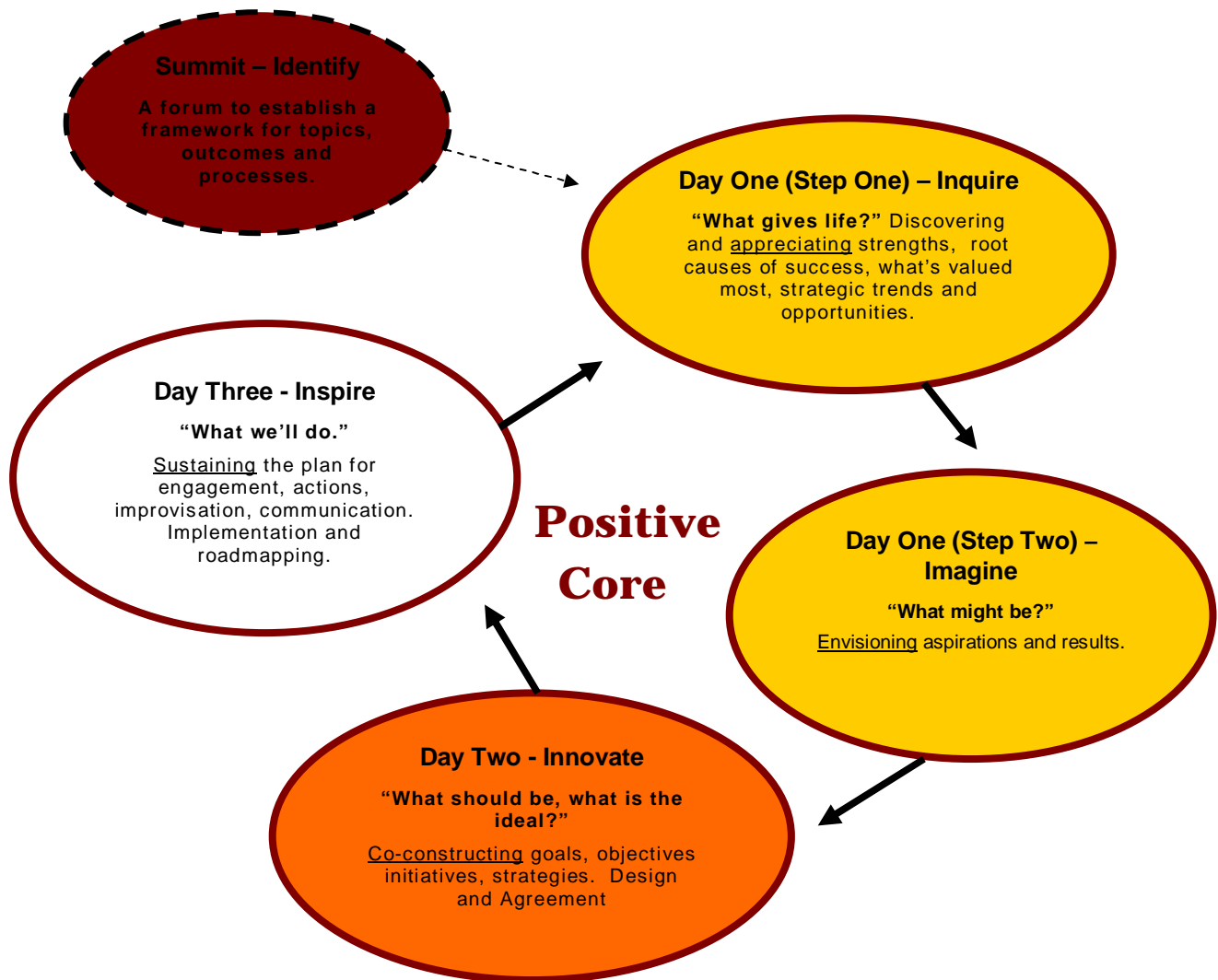
Appreciative Inquiry is a “5-I” process that balances planning with execution. **“The issues are reframed with an intentional focus on Aspirations and Results – keeping an eye on what you want to move toward (the most desired outcomes), not the potholes and canyons to be avoided.”**

- Authoritarian leadership is reframed as participatory leadership
- Financial crisis is reframed as abundant, sustainable resources
- Staff commitment and attrition is reframed as a magnetic work environment
- Poor communication is reframed as open and transparent communication

In the following graphic, note that the “5-I”s, **Identify → Inquire → Imagine → Innovate → Inspire**, are all built around a positive core, and are sequential.

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The initial step in most circumstances is a summit or design meeting where most of the core work happens. This planning meeting (it could be a series of meetings) is to establish a framework for topics, outcomes, and process agreement. A key Summit tenet is to shift the focus to the positive, building on current plans and taking the best into the future. Summit topics have included the following:

- how to have operational excellence, magnetic recruitment and retention, and so forth
- the best ways to communicate
- best practices
- aspirations
- optimal margins
- cost efficiencies
- revolutionary partnerships and alliances
- interviews and visionary work to discover strengths that can be exploited

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Primary and secondary focus is often a topic of the Summit Meeting. In the following template, the highlighted box helps determine where the positive focus of an AI/SOAR approach will be most impactful. This same template can help guide Day One activities.

high impact initiatives	quick wins, important initiatives	important initiatives requiring time and resource
low impact initiatives	easy, not critical	dogs best left sleeping
	low effort	high effort

Although the Summit Meeting may, of necessity, have limited attendance, it needs to have broad stakeholder representation. This is even more important in progressive meetings where everyone who will impact or be impacted needs to be involved. *“People commit to what they help to create. The more participative the plan creation, the more people will be committed to implementation success.”* This “whole system involvement” is a distinct departure from more traditional top-down approaches, including SWOT.

Successive meetings can be handled in a variety of ways. MFS attendees suggested focus groups, interviews, team meetings, and virtual water cooler councils and communications. But whatever the vehicle, the overriding focus is on finding *“positive and inspiring strategy development process (where) more innovative ideas will be created and possibilities explored.”*

Day One is focused on **Discovery**, inquiring into what gives the organization its current life, and what might it become in the future. Day Two is focused on getting **agreement and design** to goal areas and strategic initiatives. A key component is *“determining what’s doable”* in the form of:

- Reality checks tied to today’s core strengths
- Analyzing the gap
- Determining what the organization wants to move forward at this time: i.e., primary and secondary goals.
- Determining the results that stakeholders want to see. Which of the goal areas are common? Unique? Most compelling?
- Mutually settling on goals, SMART objectives, and initiatives

Day Three is where the “rubber meets the road.” The focus is **implementation and road-mapping**, . . . determining action plans, gaining commitments and clearly laying out next steps, writing them up to gain commitment from the impacted stakeholders. *“Sustainability necessitates simplicity in communicating the key components of the strategic plan to the diverse parties involved. This calls for a ‘less is more’ approach to the plan write-up and presentation, or what is referred to as ‘Strategy on a Page.’”*

If the previous parts of the process have been truly inclusive, there should be little to “sell,” integrating the new strategy should be resistance free. That’s the practical beauty of Appreciative Inquiry / “5-1.”