it. With some glitches, it had enabled a high level of participation and collaboration; none of the 24 participants had been marginalized. By the final sessions, even the most timid Francophonic African was arguing passionately for or against some of the propositions. Although both the conflict-avoidance and the anxiety remained present throughout as subtexts, they had not stood in the way of a genuine struggle to find a way forward from a system that, in their hearts, virtually all the participants know is in serious need of radical overhaul.

The real achievement, however, was that the group avoided buying the regional director's plan and showed him, in an unthreatening and undemeaning way, that there was a wiser, more inclusive, more enabling way forward. What precisely that will turn out to be is still uncertain. It will need much more work and even more creativity to establish. The effort will be worthwhile because when it is found, it will have the support of the whole group who will see its genesis in this workshop. And seeing it thus, there is a good chance that their fear of change, their anxiety about the future of Sigma, their diffidence before a dominating hierarchy—all of these serious inhibitions to corporate evolution—will be the more containable. That is a good return for three days' work.

Elliott, C. (1999) Locating the energy for change: An introduction to Appreciative Inquiry. Winnipeg, Manitoba, CAN: International Institute for Sustainable Development.

Chapter 14
The roundtable project

John Carter and Pamela Johnson

1. Background of rapid growth

Appreciative inquiry was still in its early stages of development when a long-term client of John Carter & Associates agreed to use it as an intervention in their organization. The site was a Big Eight accounting firm in Canada, which we will refer to as Alexander, Konstanz and Greene. AK&G was the oldest accounting firm in Canada, founded before Canada became a nation, with a historically strong presence in the French Canadian province. During the 1970s, AK&G had ranked seventh in size and significance within the Canadian market. To counter this and increase market share, they had engaged upon an aggressive strategy of growth and restructuring. In the period from 1979 to 1987, 22 separate mergers had added almost 150 new partners to the practice. The firm had wisely invested a great deal of time and attention in managing the dynamics of merger integration, and developed an industry-wide reputation for success in its merger activities.

Focusing on people enrichment as a key benefit of the mergers, the firm had created a separate human resources function at the national level. Performance review and planning processes were introduced for staff, and a partner development process was created to provide valuable feedback and career planning for partners. Several new training programs were created to help both partners and managers enhance their skills in managing people.

Q *Do you think there was something special about AK&G that made them almost uniquely suitable as early users of appreciative inquiry?*

A Yes, the managing partner of the firm believed in bringing out the best in people and put significant energy into the firm, seeing itself as a group of winners.

Believing that people who feel like winners project this image with clients and competitors, the firm had renovated their office facilities and eventually moved into new upscale offices. In 1977, major investment in new information technology had begun. In the 10 years that followed, they purchased a new mainframe computer, developed software to enhance service delivery and developed programs for training and computer support. Ultimately, their investment made possible expanded service capabilities with an availability of one computer for every two people in the firm.

Development of an aggressive marketing strategy was signalled by the creation of a national client service and development group. While the client base had expanded because of the mergers which had occurred, as well as through acquisitions by their existing clients, a new target account program had been introduced. Marketing AK&G services became a major priority for every partner.

Finally, AK&G had engaged in a four-year process to define an integral statement of intent for the firm. This effort was a long-term consensus-building process with every partner involved in its development. The result was a multipage document with a statement of mission, principles of partnership, and national objectives and strategies in 10 different areas. The statement of intent reflected essential values shared by all partners. These values included a sense of obligation to one another and a commitment to building AK&G for the long term.

The combination of these strategies had achieved considerable success. By 1985 AK&G had positioned itself as third largest of the Big Eight accounting firms in Canada. By 1987 there were 340 partners, and in 10 years to 1988 the net revenue had more than quadrupled.

2. Governance issues

In 1981 AK&G had changed its governance structure by separating management from policy and creating a unique system of shared leadership between a managing partner and the chairman of the board of directors. It soon became apparent that a significant change of leadership would occur in the mid to latter part of the 1980s. The chairman of the board and the managing partner of the firm were potentially due to leave their respective roles at the same time. Attention began to be directed to the leadership succession of the firm. Of particular importance was the development of younger partners who were regarded as having the talent, knowledge and ability to assume the leadership of the firm and maintain a willingness to manage change creatively. Further, even in the midst of the growth, turbulence and change of the last 20 years, there was felt to be a need to affirm the fundamental strengths, values and competencies that had sustained the firm over its long history. In response to these needs, by 1987 the roundtable project had been created.

* mgmt suc.

The name roundtable was chosen to suggest leadership without hierarchy, shared resources, and cross-functional networks. In his address to roundtable participants, the managing partner of AK&G explained:

> What is the roundtable? Roundtable is having you discover, explore and become missionaries for what is strong and good in the firm. The roundtable has to do with strengthening the culture of the firm and the partnership. The roundtable is working with each of you as potential leaders. When we first envisioned the roundtable, we said, "We want the next tier of potential firm leaders to ask questions such as:
>
> - What is it that makes us successful?
> - What are the special features of the partnership which are critically important and which must be retained?
> - How do we deal with each other as partners?
> - What are the key underpinnings of this firm that are critical for our continued success?
> - How can we have these emerging leaders understand and be aware of what they can and must do to build continuity into what we have as a partnership?"

3. Early stages of the roundtable project

The above questions were framed to guide the roundtable project by February of 1987, and the structure and design of the project began to assume greater form and substance in March. There were a number of assumptions and desires that undergirded the project and that closely reflected the views of the managing partner. Among these was the desire for people to have a vision and be able to talk about it, and especially to create a network of individuals in the firm who shared a common vision and could use it in a powerful way.

Q *This suggests a high degree of coaching! How much time did you spend with senior management, introducing them to appreciative inquiry before the roundtable got underway?*

A We spent four years looking for the right interventions to accomplish the desired outcomes of the managing partner and top leadership group. Once appreciative inquiry was introduced as a possible approach, it took less than three days over a three-month period to get the tacit buy-in required. We as outsiders never spent any time with the senior management on buy-in; it was all done by the top leader. The five-year window we started with was closing, and now we faced a now-or-never situation.

We wanted to create awareness of the relationship between stability and change, to identify life-giving forces within the firm and create a catalyst for enhancing and giving focus to these life-giving forces. To understand and reinforce culture, we knew we needed to heighten the capacity for vision of deepest possibilities, passion as the integration of logic and emotion, integrity which was consistent and focused, and love reflected in the ability of members to care enough about each other that they would not allow anything to get in the way. We hoped that the participants would take both vision and passion back into the firm, with a network on which they could rely for both support and collaboration.

Q *These are certainly powerful values and the last is surely unusual in this kind of context. Where did it come from? Did it cause any embarrassment or is it a reflection of the best of partnership? How would it go down in a more traditional corporate setting?*

A Love of one's work and one's partner emerged out of the data as important to those interviewed. It is a reflection of the best of the partnership. The agreement between the firm leader and the outside consultant was that absolutely nothing, including the death of one of us, would stand in the way of this project being completed.

The stages of project implementation can be seen in the following figure. Early stages were spent resolving many issues of design and logistics, such as how the affirmative topics would be determined and who would be involved.

Q *Who were these? How were they chosen? Did anyone check how those who found themselves excluded felt about it? This has a very elitist feel to it. Did that get in the way of the appreciative mode?*

A The 40 people chosen were seen as future leaders of the firm by both the current leaders and their peers. Since all partners were interviewed and everyone ultimately was involved in the process, there was little expression of in and outness. Most people looking at those chosen would have perceived the group as an equitable and fair microcosm of future leadership and not inclusive or exclusive.

A decision had been made to involve the 40 roundtable participants in all phases of an appreciative study of the organization. This meant that decisions needed to be made about who would be interviewed (especially, how to ensure that present and former leaders, history carriers, unique individuals, and those who embodied the firm were interviewed), how to educate participants in conducting an appreciative inquiry interview, how the interview protocol would be developed, how the management committee would be kept appropriately involved and informed, how the larger partnership would be engaged in the project, and so on. The managing partner and the management committee identified 40 individuals who would be participants: all were visible within AK&G as emerging leaders and had been identified as potential candidates for positions that would become available in the next three to 10 years. By April, enough of the initial plans had been solidified, and an announcement of the project was made in AK&G.

Q *Corporate memory-holders are a particular interest of mine. How did you identify them?*

A There were individuals recognized as being the embodiment of the firm and these individuals also happen to be the storytellers, carriers and creators of myth.

Q *Who is this management committee? How were they chosen? What were their terms of reference? To whom were they accountable?*

A The management committee in this firm consists of individuals selected by the managing partner and appointed by the board of directors to oversee the daily operations of the firm. They are accountable first to the partnership and second to the managing partner.

Q *This strikes me as a large number. Is this usual in your experience?*

A The number of identified future leaders is unusual. The belief underlying leadership succession was that there should be at least three individuals being trained for every critical position of leadership in the organization.

				1987							1988	
Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
	1											
			2									
				3								
						4-5						
							6					
								7-8				
								9-10				
										11		
												12

1. Structure and design of roundtable takes shape
2. Announcement to firm
3. Affirmative topics determined
4. Interview format designed
5. Interview protocol and instructional videotape sent to participants
6. Collection of data: participants conduct interviews

7. As interviews are completed, they are sent to the consultants and data are analyzed
8. Summarized interview data are sent to participants to read
9. Logo for roundtable project is developed
10. Roundtable session is conducted
11. Report to firm partnership: entire partnership consensually validates provocative propositions created during the roundtable session
12. Participants send short stories to the managing partner about what happened, what was new and what was different after the roundtable

To identify affirmative topics for the study, the managing partner designated a group consisting of himself, the chairman of the board, the human resources director, the human resources manager, the consultants and others. We asked this group three questions:

- Think back to peak experience in your professional life in the firm, a time when you felt most alive and excited about your work. Describe the key elements of the situation: Who was involved? What was happening? What was the firm like?
- As you think about the firm in general, what is it that represents the most life-giving force?
- If you could bring into the firm anything you wanted, what would you like to see more of?
- After listening to the peak experiences of members, stimulated by these questions, we asked them to identify topics that generated energy and excitement, ones they would like to study in some depth. Fifteen topics surfaced; they were presented to the management committee for their input and buy-in, and were finally boiled down to the following six affirmative topics: (1) partnership; (2) determination to be winners; (3) diversity; (4) consensus decision-making; (5) possibilities and positive thinking; and (6) conditions for people to excel. All of the preparation was now complete; the timing was right to get the roundtable participants involved in the process.

4. Middle stage: Data collection and analysis

In June, the 40 participants were formally invited to participate in the roundtable. The objectives of the program were described thus:

> "The short-term objective is for the younger group of partners to learn about the rich tradition and the ingredients of success in the firm. It is hoped that

> through this process they will become a missionary group which will work to multiply those success factors in the firm and in their offices. The long-term objective of this program is to operationalize the statement of intent through the practice of appreciative inquiry."

And the intended outcome was put like this:

- "Develop a common vision among participants based on the statement of intent and the results of appreciative inquiry."
- "Provide the proper tools for participants to work toward making the firm's vision a current and future reality."
- "Create an environment in the firm that supports pragmatic means of putting the statement of intent into action."

A qualitative interview format had been developed around the six affirmative topic areas and this protocol was sent to participants with an accompanying videotape that demonstrated the techniques of conducting an appreciative inquiry interview. In addition, each participant was paired with another participant, and the two were required to interview each other as soon as possible. This gave them some practice and feedback in conducting appreciative interviews before interviewing other partners. Each of the participants was assigned nine to 10 partners to interview and they were told interviews should last between two to three hours. Every partner in the firm was interviewed.

5. Data management

A key to management of data in this project was detailed instruction about how the data were to be transcribed and delivered for data analysis. Interviewers were instructed that completed interviews should be typewritten and submitted in hard copy or on floppy disk. The generation of large amounts of data (the first 75 interviews alone generated over 700 pages of text) and the need for prompt turnaround of the analysis made attention to detail in preparing the data for analysis a critical issue.

Responses were first subgrouped according to similarity of theme within an affirmative topic area. Next, a method of analysis was chosen for the subgroups to enhance validity and reliability. Analysis was done by two external analysts who had no prior knowledge of the process. In addition, interview data for each affirmative topic was run through a computer program which counted the number of times different words occurred as part of each response, and ranked these in order of frequency.

Q *How helpful do you find this kind of computerized discourse analysis? Many people from linguistics and literature would argue that it obscures more than it reveals. What is your experience?*

A Word count and other computer analysis provide little useful information. They indicate potential directions for inquiry and exploration, and sometimes confirmation of findings.

Raw data, edited to preserve anonymity and representing responses for 80 interviews, were provided to roundtable participants by the end of August. Participants were instructed to read the data, as a microcosm of the full set of interviews, in preparation for their attendance at the roundtable session in mid-September.

When they arrived at the session, participants also received summary materials that contained information covering each of the six affirmative topics as well as two others; namely, experience in the firm and a typical day. For each of the topics, a word and content summary from the computer database was provided. For example, on the affirmative topic of partnership, the following list of words, ranked in order of frequency, was provided for the question, "List factors that heighten responsiveness, trust and partner support?"

1. Success generates success, confidence and solidarity
2. One partner, one vote
3. Team spirit, pride
4. Partner performance feedback system
5. Quality management
6. Demonstration of integrity and justice
7. Fair play
8. Remuneration
9. Growth philosophy
10. Collective decision-making
11. Communication between partners
12. Common goals and objectives
13. Acknowledgement and announcement of accomplishments
14. Open and honest management committee
15. Open and honest board of directors
16. Delegation of administrative tasks
17. Firm's support for the partners
18. Supervision from the management
19. Office and partner assistance when needed
20. Contribution from each partner

Following the word and content summary for each topic, a two- to three-page interpretation and commentary was provided to add greater depth and context. There was no intention for the summarized information to represent the final word; rather, we hoped that the material would spark the participants' own provocative propositions about the firm and contribute to an enjoyable as well as profitable roundtable experience.

Q *Could you give some indication of the additional insight this commentary provided?*

A The commentary allowed us as outside consultants to heighten awareness of the obvious in the data that sometimes represented the unspeakable, like love and integrity. It supported making things people take for granted real and alive versus silent and dead.

During this phase of the roundtable project, there were three points we wished to emphasize. First was the emphasis we placed on multigenerational learning; in this we had been influenced by the work of Margaret Mead. From her anthropological work, she had become aware that to develop communities capable of learning required the involvement of three generations: the elders to provide wisdom based in lessons of the past; the middle-aged to provide responsibility in response to the challenges of the present; and youth to provide vision, hope and optimism in anticipation of the future. In this inquiry, younger partners were engaged in learning from each of the other two generations, even as they were being encouraged to develop their vision for the future responsibility of the firm. An underlying metaphor might be, "The deeper and stronger are the roots, the taller and more far reaching are the branches." Following the roundtable session, we intended to use images of the future of the firm created by these 40 partners to promote dialogue among all the partners and across generations.

Second, because each of the participants had actually conducted the interviews, they each owned and could represent a significant portion of the data available in the partnership at large. In contrast with an inquiry where the client generates and owns the data, here, the participants were the data: it was inside them. Individually and collectively, they were a microcosm of the partnership at large.

Last, we gave much attention to images and symbols that could integrate value and fact, reason and emotion, and create an integrative or contextual framework for the roundtable project. Two particular examples were important. In early September, a logo was created for the project. The logo comprises, first, two horizontal, outward-pointing arrows which represented the national, coast-to-coast scope of the project; they also represented the direction of future leadership and focus. The second component was two vertical arrows pointing inward to a centre point. These represented receiving input and feedback. The logo was used on all materials. It was explained to all roundtable participants, and was later introduced at the annual partners' meeting for the entire firm. Even language acquired a symbolic significance. For example, the very term *roundtable* became part of the connective language of this group of partners, and continues to be present for many partners today, despite massive changes and restructuring in the firm.

6. The roundtable session and application of appreciative inquiry in large-group settings

The AK&G roundtable session had five objectives. Each of these will be discussed below, along with the actual session design and the methods we used to accomplish the objectives.

I. *Reaffirm affirmative topic choices and create a common base of data for all participants*

The AK&G roundtable was a 3 1/2 day design. The initial challenge was to transform individuals, each of whom carried some part of the data with them into the session, into a community of inquiry with a common set of data. As we have already seen, before the roundtable, participants had received raw data from 80 interviews and later received word-count analysis and summarized interpretations of the data from the consultants. This was no substitute, however, for sharing their personal experience of the interviews, the understandings, surprises and insights they had attained.

To achieve this, we facilitated a discussion around the following four questions:

1. What one word best characterizes your experience of the appreciative inquiry interviews?
2. What was the most exciting, surprising or humorous thing that occurred during your interviews?
3. Based on the interview data you have, what would be the most important outcome or message for all partners from the roundtable session?
4. What do you believe is the essence or life-giving force of the firm?

The effect of those discussions was that both the objective data and the subjective experiences of the participants were now available to the whole group. However, the leadership of the firm also needed an opportunity to add to the mix, to talk about their interpretation of the data and contribute their perspectives, especially in the context of current organizational dilemmas and challenges. The initial discussions of the data were therefore followed, the next day, by the current managing partner talking about what he wanted from the roundtable

project. Consistent with our effort to generate dialogue rather than talking heads, we then created a fish bowl of the management committee. Grouping them in the middle of the room surrounded by roundtable participants, we asked them to talk with one another about what personally excited them in the data and what they saw as possible outcomes. They engaged in an animated conversation which illuminated their values and hopes for the continued integrity of the partnership and the future strength of the firm. There was an opportunity for roundtable participants to add their observations and to ask questions after this conversation.

Q *I am interested in what appears to be a privileged role in this process for the leadership of the firm. Did you not find that this cut across the principles of co-inquiry?*

A In the words of Ken Wilber, there is always hierarchy. This was our way of acknowledging the leader hierarchy in the room without allowing the leaders to exercise any control over the dialogue. It was also our way of forcing the issue of buy-in, since the management committee at this point had still given only tacit buy-in to the intervention.

At this point, both the voices of individual participants and current leadership were present in the room. This enabled us to test whether the affirmative topics which had been determined in May after discussion with the management committee were still applicable. There was also a possibility that new affirmative topics were implicitly or explicitly suggested by the data. We wanted to give participants the opportunity both to affirm the relevance of the topics which had been selected, and to create new topics if that seemed warranted. Knowing that the topics selected would govern the provocative propositions to be created, the goal was to grant the participants, future leaders of the firm, full ownership for a vision of the future they would collectively create.

From these discussions, all of the topics were re-affirmed by the participants and two were added. Since the design called for each group to focus on one affirmative topic for the remainder of the roundtable, the next step was to decide which groups would work on what topics. During the two-hour lunch break, the roundtable staff talked with a designated representative from each group who explained the nature of their discussion, which topics had generated energy and why, and made a case for the topics which most interested the group. Based on this data, the staff made assignments so that the groups could begin work on their affirmative topic in the next phase of the roundtable. At this point, the roundtable participants had full ownership of the topics of inquiry and sufficient common ground to make possible discussions about prospects for the future of AK&G.

II. *State provocative propositions about the life-giving properties in the firm*

In terms of writing provocative propositions, the task assigned to the groups was to discuss the ideal organizational embodiment of their assigned affirmative topic.

As so often happens, the groups at first found the process of writing provocative propositions awkward. Affirmational writing requires that the propositions be written in the present tense even though they may not fully reflect the present reality. They require language in the present tense, and use of words that generate effect and inspiration. This is in stark contrast with concise, objective writing that most use in normal business transactions, and groups are often somewhat conservative in the statements they eventually produce. It must be recognized, however, that, from the point of view of their creators, these statements are often highly radical. They often represent a large jump from the *status quo*, even though all of the propositions are grounded in best of present practice. It must also be stressed that the dialogue that occurs in the groups as they create the propositions is at least as significant as the propositions they produce.

Groups were given the opportunity to present their provocative propositions to the full roundtable. They were encouraged to do this in creative ways to spark the imagination of others and convey their excitement about the vision of the ideal they had created. For example, they could do this with a panel, a skit or role play, as "ten commandments," and so on. The purpose was to educate and inspire others about what was possible. There was opportunity for other participants to ask clarifying questions, but not to argue or debate any of the propositions. A few of the propositions roundtable participants created for the topic of partnership are shown below:

1. There is an attitude that strives to have the principles of partnership consistently applied to partners and staff alike.
2. The partnership is committed to a management style that is inspirational, directive and consultative.
3. The concept of shared ownership demands that each partner be responsible for the success of the firm and its future direction.
4. In recognition that we are in a knowledge business, leaders direct and partners accept responsibility for significant relevant self-development, including personal, professional and people-management skills.
5. Each partner is responsible to leave a legacy in terms of building firm assets, including people, clients and services.
6. Partners in the firm who cease to have the leadership positions are retained in substantial roles to ensure their contribution.

We have found that the experiences of creating provocative propositions, of freeing a group to think optimistically and hopefully about building a future vision based on the strengths of the present, are enormously uplifting for participants. The quality of this conversation does transcend differences and build bridges. Individuals begin to discover, sometimes to their astonishment, that others seem to share similar values, dreams and hopes, and that there is much common ground between them. In our experience, this process of discovery continues during the remainder of the workshop. It is highly affirming to the participants, building resilience in the group to deal with the differences that inevitably arise.

Q *Yes, but they are often very conservative, as you recognize below. Do you have any general comments on the paradox this represents?*

A Realizable provocative propositions will be conservative; idealized provocative propositions should not be conservative. Conservative propositions are an indication that accountability, goal setting and strategic planning have become more the focus than innovative and creative thinking that are focused on the best of the best.

When the groups present their provocative propositions the night before, we ask them to print each proposition neatly on a flipchart page and numerically order them. We also ask them to write the propositions in the same order on a piece of paper. After the session ends, the staff tapes these to the walls of the room and attaches the scales we will use for consensual validation the next day. Also, we have already formatted a computer disk with the scales so that all that needs to be added are the propositions; accordingly, one staff member takes responsibility for typing the propositions into the format and creating a document which is, in effect, a questionnaire for participants to complete the next morning.

At the roundtable, we validated the propositions using two scales. The first was an ideal-state scale (I) which asked, "To what extent do you believe that this statement is important as an ideal to be pursued by the organization?" The second was a present-state scale (P) which asked, "To what extent is the statement actually reflected in practice?" The rating for each question was on a seven-point scale, where one indicated *to a very little extent* and seven indicated *to a very great extent*. In other words, a participant who marked one for the ideal-state scale would be saying that they absolutely disagreed that the proposition reflected a valid ideal for the firm while a seven indicated absolute agreement that the proposition should be an ideal for the future of the firm. Likewise, a one in the present-state scale indicated that the proposition was never realized in the present state, while a seven meant that the statements reflected what was always true in current practice. Examples of two propositions created during the roundtable illustrate how they would be prepared for validation.

The leaders in the firm are role models for positive thinking: motivators, listeners and risk takers.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
P	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

The firm supports people in the development and use of their imagination, creativity, determination and vision.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
P	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Each provocative proposition created by groups the night before is in hard copy with the appropriate scales for individual participants to complete the next morning. The same propositions surround participants on the walls, organized according to affirmative topic. Most participants are somewhat stunned when they walk into the room the next morning, seeing their work of the day before made almost larger than life and central to the remainder of the session.

The first task of the morning was to instruct the participants to go through the document which had been prepared for them, and ask them to answer the questions for each proposition by placing their individual ranking in each of the scales. We do this individually first so that participants can think about their choices privately and make the appropriate response.

We then began to construct a group scattergram. Each participant had been given sheets of variously coloured Avery dots sufficient to the number of propositions. Group members were asked to take their individual responses and move to the propositions on the wall. For each proposition, they were asked to place an Avery dot on both the ideal-state and the present-state scales which reflected their private responses. We told them to use a red dot for their I-scale response and a blue dot for their P-scale response because this heightens the visual impact of the gap between the ideal and the present state. Because everyone was moving at once, at their own pace and in different sections of the room, it was almost impossible to see where people placed their dot. The result was a completely level playing field that was not influenced by the articulated opinions of others perceived as being of higher status or greater power.

Q *We have often found what we call an agglomeration effect, i.e., people tend to go with the flow. Is that your experience?*

A It is a serious risk with any large group process and needs to be managed. If the focus is kept on common ground and common compelling pictures of the future, rather than attempting to problem-solve conflicts, this risk is minimized.

When they were done, group members were asked to walk around the room and look at where the dots have been placed. Without photographs, it is hard to describe the visual impact of seeing the gap between the ideal and the present state so graphically and colourfully depicted. The impact on participants is usually one of surprise: either there is more or less agreement about the ideal state than they expected, for example. There is often surprise about the extent of the common ground which exists. Also, there may be outliers which trigger the curiosity of some people who have placed their dot on a three or a four when the greater number of dots is on the six and seven. People are sometimes intrigued by how large the gap between the ideal and the present state is; alternatively, they may be surprised at how narrow the gap is.

Q *On reflection do you regret that—as you imply below?*

A Critical analysis is important to appreciative inquiry and problem solving. I do not like the term appreciative mode because most people equate it with simply looking at the positive without any discipline.

During the roundtable, there was not much time for discussion of the ratings before moving to the second part of consensual validation. In our work with subsequent organizations, we allow more time for plenary discussion of the data which has been generated. Sometimes, people will express their curiosity about outliers and ask if the persons who placed their dots in those positions would be willing to discuss their response. Usually, participants frame their question as an inquiry with the effect of reducing defensiveness, and very often people will respond, talking freely about their perceptions and the rationale for their response. Sometimes, they are responding to the phrasing or word choice in the statement, but at other times it reflects a substantive difference of perception. At these times, most participants are careful to listen fully to the individual's perception and to state their differences of opinion openly, as a difference, without disparaging the view of the other. There is more emphasis on sharing meanings than searching for a single truth.

One important mechanism for insuring open dialogue is a technique we use for letting people know how others are responding to them. It often happens that we do not know how people are responding to our statements, and this can be particularly disheartening when one is speaking at a level of deep values and understandings. We believe it is important during the discussion to allow people to see where the consensus is in response to individual statements. Each participant is given an index card and asked to fold it into a tent. On one side they place a red dot, and on the other a green dot. When anyone is speaking, a green dot indicates agreement with the speaker and a red dot indicates a point of conflict. It is possible for the speaker then to ask those with red dots what their reservations or reactions are to what has been stated and to reveal this information for discussion. Surprisingly, we have found groups highly receptive to this technique. When there is laughter or great agreement, people sometimes wave their green dots in the air to emphasize it; this likewise happens with the red dot when intense disagreement is felt. It makes each person responsible for articulating their consensus or their difference, and grants each speaker the opportunity to make the appropriate inquiry.

7. Force-field analysis

The next step in the process was to begin to examine current realities which would affect the capacity of the organization to generate movement toward the ideal. To do this, we instructed the groups to conduct a force-field analysis by exploring the forces which could hinder or support creation of the ideal organizational state as represented by the provocative propositions they had created. This can be done quite simply on flipcharts, with facilitating forces (tail-winds) listed on one side and hindering forces (head-winds) on the other. Groups usually like this part of the process because it feels familiar, using more of their accustomed analytical skills.

Groups were then asked to return and to give a 10- to 15-minute presentation on the forces they had identified for their propositions. Before they proceeded, however, we assigned a different group to watch each presentation very carefully so that they could prepare a rebuttal. This was done to reduce the possibility of blind spots in the group's analysis and of group think. This is consistent with Argyris' (1985) theory of organizational learning in which the principal goal is to generate valid and confirmable data, thus reducing the possibility of defensive routines. After the group presentation, each group was given about a half hour to prepare a five-minute rebuttal to the group they had been assigned to point out inconsistencies and challenge assumptions. By the time these presentations were concluded, the entire group had a very clear idea about environmental contingencies and current realities, the opportunities they created and the dilemmas they posed in moving to the ideal state.

Q *Do you ever find that this devil's advocacy process jolts the group out of the appreciative mode and pushes them back into the old paradigm?*

A Dialogue is the cornerstone and most important product of appreciative inquiry. Every design compromise which undercuts individual, interpersonal and group dialogue significantly undermines the potential outcome. The ideal would be to have a paperless process with enough dialogue that what is deemed important becomes institutionalized through dialogue.

The force-field analysis represents a bridge to the problem-solving side of the process, but we did not shift the focus of the session to problem solving at this point. Conducting a force-field analysis uncovered some of the problems which would need to be solved to achieve the desired future state. However, any problem solving would happen after the event, spurred by the energy and commitments of participants. At this point, the force-field analysis grounded participants in current realities and enabled them to create realizable provocative propositions in the next phase of the design. We know that provocative propositions which are too ideal or which represent too much of a stretch from the current reality can be demoralizing for the participants. At the same time, if the ideal has energy and commitment of the members, it will make movement possible in spite of obstacles. The key is to produce a provocative proposition which is an appropriate stretch for the organization, neither too comfortable nor light years from possibility. The intent of the force-field was to help participants reveal and challenge each others' notions about current realities so that they could eventually make decisions about how to rewrite the provocative propositions.

8. State realizable provocative propositions

After being brought face to face with the constraints and opportunities implied by their construction of present reality, groups returned to write provocative propositions which, while remaining a significant stretch, would be more realizable for AK&G. Specifically, they were asked to rewrite provocative propositions for each affirmative topic so they would represent what could realistically be achieved and which group members believed they and the rest of the partnership should commit themselves to working toward. They were then given the opportunity to present these to the roundtable.

Since our work with the roundtable, we have experimented with various processes to create more possibility for dialogue around this activity. For example, we sometimes add a third scale in both the provocative proposition document and on the wall. This scale is for answering a question about the achievability (A) of the statement: "To what extent do you believe that this statement is achievable given current organizational and environmental realities?" Again, a one would indicate that the statement is absolutely impossible to achieve, and a seven would indicate that the statement is absolutely certain to be achieved. This question is asked after the force-field analysis. Participants are once more asked to respond first on their questionnaire, and then place a green Avery dot on the A-scale for each proposition. The results are very revealing and reflect the group's perception of the impact of current realities on the ability of the organization to move toward the ideal.

The relationship between the scales is significant. For example, if people strongly agree that a statement does reflect the desired ideal-state, and there is a large gap between the ideal and the present state, a group may decide to rank the working on propositions with moderate to high achievability. On the other hand, some people are impassioned by the difficulty of a challenge and will rank those statements which reflect a deeply felt ideal where the relative achievability is low. If the gap between the ideal and the actual is not large and the achievability is high, the group may lose energy because the statement is not really provocative: there is not enough dissonance to catalyze additional effort. Data generated through the use of the third scale can be used to stimulate dialogue about what would be necessary to rewrite provocative propositions so that they are more achievable, even while they retain some of the tension and risk which create a stretch and impel action.

Q *Do you ever find that this encourages excessive wordsmithing?*

A The devil's advocate process is an input process, not focused on input to determine a particular outcome or to micro-manage the work of others.

In subsequent work we have found that people sometimes have input, advice or reactions to provocative propositions for affirmative topics other than the ones they have been assigned to work on. These data need to be made available to groups who will be rewriting the propositions. At a recent retreat with one department within a major hospital, we dealt with this in two ways. First, we placed a flipchart sheet below each provocative proposition on the wall and asked participants to use that sheet to write any reactions, opinions or input they wanted to influence the group's discussion. Also, we gave each person an index card, telling them that if there were any provocative propositions they thought were missing or needed to be added, they should write it on the card and give it to a staff member. Whatever method is selected, the purpose is to get any input the group needs to consider before rewriting realizable provocative propositions.

9. State personal commitments and plan next steps for acting on provocative propositions

At this point, there had been much discussion about the strengths of the present, the possibilities of the future and current environmental and organizational realities. Participants had gotten to know each other better than they ever had before, to explore each other's deepest values and hopes for the firm. The roundtable session had by this time revealed common purposes and shared meanings, and it was possible to begin focusing on personal commitments individuals would make in response to the provocative propositions and the roundtable event as a whole.

Roundtable participants were asked to state their commitments to the entire group, and these statements were audiotaped to be transcribed and published in

the documentation to participants after the event. The consultant who introduced the process framed it in the following way:

> "What we want to do this evening is to have each of you, as participants, be willing to state some particular goal that is important to you, we hope either emerging from or supported by the information that has been generated by the provocative propositions, and having to do with something you want to act upon over the next year. It should be one that you're willing to take some action on in the next seven days, and definitely do something before the partners' meeting [a month away]... It can be as simple as having a conversation with someone about your particular goal, or some particular steps that you want to take so you are more public and can build the support you feel you need to move forward.
>
> For some people in this room, committing themselves to a particular action to achieve a publicly declared goal in a group of people this size can be pretty anxiety-provoking or frightening. Questions arise like, What if I don't deliver on it after I've made it public to 53 peers here? What if I change my mind? What if I don't actually have a goal that I have some passion about or really care about in a way that I'm willing to put out to this group at this particular time?
>
> These are legitimate questions. It's okay to say, 'I really don't have something I have a passion about at this time, but here are a couple things I'm thinking about.' And it is legitimate to put something out here and later to come along and say that things have happened and that you've changed your mind about that particular goal. But then you have to be willing to put out what's taken its place or what you have arrived at that you've really invested in."

By introducing the activity in this way, following an enjoyable dinner on their last evening together, the consultant made it possible for individuals to talk about goals and commitments that were still tentative or being formed. He also created an environment of safety, which he then reinforced with some personally revealing stories about times he had experienced the power of profound commitment. Examples of the personal commitments made by three individuals are shown below.

> "The two concepts that clearly have interested and excited me and aroused my passion are leadership and the concept of legacy. I think those are important concepts that can provide some exciting frameworks for some of the work we should be doing and that I'd like to do. So my goal for the next year is to have the concept of leadership and legacy understood, accepted and evident in a stronger way in my office partners... In terms of action steps in the next seven days, I clearly intend to get leadership and legacy on the agenda of my partners' meeting next Friday. I would hope we could reach agreement

that this is an important topic to become a theme for ongoing discussions throughout the year so we can begin to flesh it out in terms of some action plans."

"The action step that I had in mind, because I have a lot to learn to understand the office environment that I'm going into, is to spend some time between now and the partners' meeting with each and every staff member. I think that will have a lot of impact on my personal learning. I think at the same time, if I go out of here with the enthusiasm that I came in here with, and take the opportunity to talk to each of those staff members to share some of the values and excitements that are coming out of this conference, I will have covered little bits and pieces of a number of the provocative propositions. While I'm doing that, of course, the other thing is that within the next two weeks, I will also address the issue of how to put a more formal, more structured communication plan in place in my office."

"I looked at the interview data and the messages that the partners have told us or that I've read things that are important to the firm and things that would allow me to do my job better. I'm looking at areas like improved communications, listening better to partners and staff, sharing our plans, sharing our visions, asking more about and listening to their hopes and aspirations in a sense, being more supportive and positive to the staff..."

The personal commitments, aspirations and values expressed capped a session in which new relationships and understandings had been forged. The statements were symbolic of the trust which had been established and would become the basis for the trust which would remain after the conference.

Q *How was this follow-up received by the roundtable participants? Did they see it as a welcome proof of the continuing interest of senior management or did they see it as unwelcome pressure from on high?*

A They welcomed it and actually wanted more. It was perceived as support for their agenda and what they wanted to see happen as part of the desired future. It also supported them keeping themselves focused in the midst of very powerful competing organization agendas.

Six months after the roundtable, the managing partner sent a memo to all of the participants and asked them to send him a short story of what had happened, and what was new and different after the roundtable. Most participants responded, and all stated how they had acted on their commitments of that evening and how those commitments had shifted because of other pressing business contingencies. In several cases, there were samples of newsletters and communication strategies which had been developed after the session. About two months after he received the responses, the managing partner had copies of all of the responses distributed to all

of the roundtable participants so that they could see the activities which had been catalyzed in those personal commitments. In addition, he continued to follow up with participants at six-month intervals, asking them for reports on their progress around commitments they made, and this continued for a period of 18 months.

10. Long-term impact

After the roundtable in September, the provocative propositions created by participants were prepared for presentation and consensual validation by the full partnership of the firm. The partners' meeting took place a month later, in October of 1987. All 350 partners were provided with the entire set of raw interview data, edited to assure anonymity of the respondent, as well as a set of summarized data. Presentations about the roundtable project and its significance for the firm were made by David Cooperrider, John Carter and the managing partner. All of the partners then broke into groups of 50 to validate by consensus the propositions, using an identical process to the one described earlier. Most of the propositions were supported, and the process had the effect of collectively re-energizing the partnership around their shared values and commitments. It was also successful in expanding the impact of the intervention throughout the firm.

Q *I am interested that you write "re-energized." Does this imply that energy was flagging? I ask because some of the organizations with which we are familiar have told us that they find they need another appreciative inquiry shot in the arm after about two years. This slightly bothers us, because it suggests that the appreciative mode has not taken root very deeply after the first intervention. Perhaps we are naive to think that it should or could.*

A Shared values and common commitments are largely part of the context and ground in organizations. Without periodic or constant individual and group interventions which heighten collective awareness, these important reference and contact points cease to be part of the compelling picture and lose their ability to mobilize energy.

It is now five years after the roundtable, and it continues to have significant influence in the organization. The real impact was less the roundtable event itself than the fact that people continued talking about their experience, how the roundtable had influenced their values and the things they eventually began to act upon in the organization. Even more significant, many aspects of the theory, concept and methodology of appreciative inquiry attached to the roundtable experience continue to be used. Participants were empowered to use techniques such as scattergrams, use of provocative propositions to envision a desired future, and acting from an appreciative stance with meetings of their office partners, and sometimes with office managers and staff, often leading to enhanced communication and participation within the firm.

Since then AK&G has been through an international merger which doubled the size of the partnership in Canada. Without the roundtable, it is likely that the organizational culture of AK&G would have been extinguished. Instead, it caused people to be clear about what they valued and wished to preserve in the new organization. Further, roundtable participants continued to use the theory, concepts and techniques they had experienced in their individual offices to help build the culture of the new firm. From a multinational perspective, the merger was actually a takeover of AK&G. In Canada, because of the strength of the AK&G culture, the situation has actually been closer to a reverse takeover. Even more surprising, the partners from the other firm have been pleased about this because it addressed many of the problems and issues inherent in their culture. Merger dynamics are difficult in any organization, but the roundtable project is recognized throughout the merged organization as being instrumental in ensuring successful management of the merger in Canada.

11. Key insights and conclusion

There are four propositions about what is necessary to institutionalize change which reflect our learning from this intervention. By institutionalizing change, we mean perpetuating core values and principles that are integral to the culture of the firm and the integrity of its business practices. Change is institutionalized when it has deeply affected the hearts, minds and guts of individuals involved so that, when appropriate, they tend to recreate their learning. It is institutionalized when it is perceived as responsive to relevant business needs within the context of client service. It may seem counter-intuitive to talk about institutionalized change, especially with the current focus on turbulent or chaotic change and the ability for any organization to be able to turn on a dime successfully to respond to global challenges. However, in the midst of change, continuity must also be managed, and this can mean the continuity of best business practices which will make an organization more successful in the future.

1. The most powerful change is that which strengthens the best of the existing culture.

   A change project is paradoxical in that its power lies not in loosening the cultural grip to bring in the radically new, but rather in strengthening the best of what already exists. Many cultural change efforts tend to throw the baby out with the bathwater in their zealousness to move toward something new. Many organizations and consultants may ignore (and thereby negate) the best of what made them successful in the past. In doing this, essential elements of the very culture which could help the organization realize its preferred state may be irrevocably lost. The discovery and celebration of the core values and principles which have made an organization successful in the past may be the most critical aspect of developing a compelling vision of the future which inspires energy and momentum.

2. Institutionalizing change is easier when: (1) there is alignment and commitment to the mission and superordinate values of the organization; (2) people are deeply responsible and accountable for acting on their commitments; and (3) change is seen as enhancing business objectives.

   In AK&G these conditions were especially well met. The statement of intent had been developed with the input and involvement of the full partnership. It represented a statement of shared values and commitments which established common ground for all of the partners. Further, partners experience themselves as highly accountable owners of the firm, and key stakeholders of its success. Many partners see their role as participating in a way that leaves some future legacy for the firm. There is no compromise on professional values, the integrity of the practice or the desire to do high-quality work which will ensure that business objectives are achieved. Because of this uncompromising commitment to shared values, there is willingness to do whatever is necessary to ensure continued integrity in the practice which includes changing habits, behaviours and attitudes as necessary to ensure continued success.

3. Institutionalizing change requires structures and processes which ensure rich dialogue and a basis for establishing a group will be based on a chain of consent rather than a chain of command.

   Again, we stress the distinction of dialogue as the communication of shared meanings mentioned earlier. The roundtable event offered the next generation of firm leaders an opportunity for sustained dialogue around superordinate values and goals. Afterwards, participants created a number of meetings which provided others in the organization with a significant forum for open discussion, dialogue and debate. Such meetings allow organizational members to have voice and enhance collective commitment to decisions which provide the basis for mutual action toward change goals.

4. When you are strengthening the culture to change it, we suggest that the following principles, processes and structures will be helpful.

   - Seed the organization with those values, norms and practices that are strongest. Organizing powerful but isolated events to institute such values, norms and practices are less important than their gradual dispersion and implementation.
   - Promote cross-generational learning. The elders point to the best of the past and provide wisdom; the middle-aged point to the reality of the present and provide discipline; and the youth point to the possibilities of the future and provide inspiration.