

# I. Shifting to a Strength-Based Approach

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*This chapter introduces the idea of using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in the career development process. The concept of modifying traditional career development questions of “who am I?,” “where am I going?,” and “how do I get there?” is transformed to “discovery, dream, design, and destiny,” also called the “4-D Cycle.”*

## Career Development and Appreciative Inquiry

As a career development professional, you have likely been trained to help your clients, students, or participants to identify their values, skills, and abilities related to the world of work, to generate options about how they could fit into the world of work, and to strategize about how to achieve their goals. This process is the foundation of the field and has been practiced successfully over time. A competent professional will always ask, “Is there a way to enhance these time-tested practices?”

What if career development discussions focused on looking at the client’s, student’s, or participant’s experiences when things were going well, in situations when they felt most excited and successful? What if every question you asked was seen as both a prompt for gathering information and also as a strategy for influencing behavior?

This monograph introduces a new approach to career development – one which applies the systems approach of Appreciative Inquiry to the process of finding one’s life passion. It is a “Strength-Based Approach” to career development using the process of Appreciative Inquiry. In this chapter, interventions are approached from the perspective of the career development professional guiding an individual through the “Building on your Strengths” process. This chapter provides an overview, foundational concepts, important definitions, comparisons to other approaches, and caveats. Chapter II offers an abbreviated history of and background on Appreciative Inquiry. A more detailed analysis and discussion of the Strength-Based Approach is the focus of Chapter III. Chapter IV demonstrates one application of this approach through a workshop setting.

Appreciative Inquiry is typically applied to systems rather than individuals. Since Appreciative Inquiry is a systems approach and the Strength-Based Approach is focused on individual career development, this monograph adapts the system approach to the individual. The groundwork leading up to that adaptation begins at the

system level with Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry “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” (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 14). Watkins and Mohr (2001) also provided this summary of Appreciative Inquiry:

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to the development of human systems that recognizes that we can choose the view that either (1) Human systems are primarily constellations of problems/obstacles to be analyzed and overcome, or (2) Human systems contain mysterious life-giving forces to be understood and embraced.

Appreciative Inquiry recognizes that whichever assumption we make about the nature of reality, the choice will lead us to a certain focus in our conversations. And those conversations will in turn lead to action at both the conscious and unconscious levels.

Appreciative Inquiry uses the power of inquiry to engage our imagination, which in turn influences our actions. By focusing through inquiry on that which is life-giving, that which is energizing, that which is joyful and fun, and by amplifying those qualities by involving the “whole system” in co-construction and co-innovation based on the finding of the inquiry, AI enables systems to transform themselves. (p. 61)

The translation to individual terms is an easy one — seeking, identifying, and enhancing the life-giving forces when achieving an optimal balance over the course of the lifespan. The Strength-Based Approach to career development is the realization of the life-giving forces in creating a work-life balance.

The extension of the Strength-Based Approach to individual career development, and, more specifically, to the work-life balance component, is viewed in the terms laid out in Hansen’s (1997) Integrative Life Planning model (defined later in this chapter) which encourages

a systemic view of the individual when considering work and life decisions, and engages the connections between self, community, and the greater society. An example that might demonstrate this approach comes out of the story of the educational consultant who decided to change jobs. The consultant had what he described as the “best job of his life.” It drew on his creativity, his writing and presenting skills, his teaching skills, and his passion for education and, specifically, his interest in career development. The job offered him opportunities to write, work on software development, and engage other professionals across the country in developing more effective educational systems. The challenge for this consultant was that he was beginning to spend more time traveling and working out of state than he was at home with his young family. He realized that while he had the best job of his life, he had an undesirable life. Somewhere along his career progression, his focus became narrowed toward his work, away from the other important people and things in his life; his sense of work-life balance was skewed toward work. For one of the first times in his life, he engaged his immediate family in the discussion about his career.

Together, they identified the components of his work that gave him the most satisfaction — the teaching, the ability to be creative, the entrepreneurial prospects, and most importantly the opportunities for creating an impact on others through education. He and his partner also considered their life system — their infant son, other family members in the community, and the type of life they envisioned. After identifying those important and positive, energizing characteristics, he began to look for a new job.

The result was that he was able to find another job that required much less travel, was nearly as enjoyable as his previous job (and that also built on his strengths and passion), and one that offered him the opportunity to spend time at home with his family. This story exemplifies an appreciative approach to career development and illustrates using the combination of life-giving forces to find a better work-life balance.

In many ways, the “Building on your Strengths” approach is an individual’s articulated narrative relative to personal strengths, passions, and successes. It is about looking at those times when things are going well, developing an image of what one wants, learning from others how they have been successful, and creating an image that can be continually regenerated and that is then used as a guide for one to plan the future. At the simplest level, one outcome is achieving satisfaction and success by building on personal strengths and managing around weaknesses.

## Moving Toward a Strength-Based Approach

The Strength-Based Approach is just that, an approach. It is both a way of thinking and a way of behaving that is broad and at the foundation of the work being done. In this way, the Strength-Based Approach, much like Appreciative Inquiry, is not intended to be seen as a tool or a strategy used for a narrowly focused intervention. This approach requires the ability to change our focus from problem-solving and deficit-based (or “find-the-fixes” approach) to a process of seeking what has been successful and going well, and asking how we could do more of those things. It is a change in the way we see the world and the application of that view to career development.

One example from the workplace is drawn from the system that people use for evaluating performance. Performance reviews often center on getting both positive feedback as well as defining areas for improvement. After one leaves the review session, how often does one focus on “areas for improvement” versus the positive information? If in that meeting, 5 minutes were spent on improvements and 55 minutes on the areas where one exceeded expectations, what would be remembered the most? Following the meeting, does one focus on the 5 minutes or the 55 minutes? The point is that feedback from educational experiences, from the workplace, and from society influences the picture one has of oneself which, in turn, potentially creates from all the multiple possible realities a reality that improvement is needed rather than a feeling of success and satisfaction. The resulting shift in focus creates an “overcoming deficiencies” approach rather than a “building on strengths” approach. The connection between the focus chosen (strength-based versus deficit-based) and self-concept and, in a more specific sense, occupational self-concept, highlights the importance of considering the Strength-Based Approach.

The significance of this connection from a career development perspective is great. Super, Savickas, and Super (1996) wrote, “[a] career can be viewed as the life course of a person encountering a series of developmental tasks and attempting to handle them in such a way as to become the kind of person he or she wants to be” (p. 140). If the outcome of those developmental tasks is not framed effectively, the impact is both immediate (self-confidence) and long-lasting, as suggested in this earlier excerpt from the same chapter:

Career self-concept theory concentrates on the

personal meaning of abilities, interests, values, and choices as well as how they coalesce into life themes. This subjective perspective helps clients to understand facts and experience in their own terms. Purpose, not traits, is the emphasis of the subjective approach to conceptualizing the self.

Objective measures identify a person's similarity to others, whereas subjective assessment reveals the person's uniqueness. Consider interest assessment as an example. Objective measures of interests identify the strength of an interest relative to some comparison group, whereas subjective stories reveal the origins of the interest in a life history, the contemporary expression of the interest, and the possible future use of that interest in pursuing goals and values. (p. 139)

Approaching career development from a strength-based approach reinforces an occupational self-concept that captures the positive life themes for use in setting future life and career goals.

## Foundational Concepts

There was a shelter in Iowa that provided a safe haven for women and children who were battered, emotionally abused, or in otherwise difficult situations. The women were often faced with making very tough decisions about their own life as well as the lives of their children. It took a great deal of courage for them to make the choice to leave their current situations for unsure futures. When the women entered the shelter, as part of meeting their physical and emotional needs, the emphasis was not on the horrible things that had brought these women to the safe house, but rather on the power it took for them to make a tough decision and risk seeking a new life. The focus was on each individual as a survivor rather than a victim. It was amazing to see the impact of this centering on strengths as the women began to make new lives and carry forward the best of who they were. While this emphasis was not described as a strength-based approach, at its core it captures the concepts.

Although the next chapter covers Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in greater detail, there are some foundational concepts which are useful to discuss here. In Appreciative Inquiry, there is an assumption that all systems have untapped, rich stories which can be accessed through interviews, dialogue with others, guided imagery, and through the identification of themes, patterns, and life-giving forces. Interviews also connect with the notion that through conversation

we create new images that lead to new actions and behaviors. Hammond (1996) identified eight assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry:

1. In every society, organization, or group, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey into the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality. (pp. 20–21)

Revisiting the example presented earlier in this section depicts an Appreciative Inquiry or Strength-Based Approach applied on an individual level. In working with the women entering the shelter, the focus was on what worked for them. By doing so, it focused on the strengths the women had that they could then take more confidently into the future.

The Appreciative Inquiry process varies depending on the context of the inquiry and is guided by the “four Ds”: discovery, dream, design, and destiny (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2005) describe the systems approach of Appreciative Inquiry as “a form of organizational study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight, and illuminate what are referred to as the ‘life-giving’ forces of the organization’s existence, its positive core” (p. 4). In the initial phase of an Appreciative Inquiry, two questions are behind any undertaking:

1. What, in this particular setting and context, gives life to this system — when is it most alive, healthy, and symbiotically related to its various communities?
2. What are the possibilities, expressed and latent, that provide opportunities for more effective (value-congruent) forms of organizing?  
(Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005, p. 4)

Also critical to the process is the appreciative interview. “The uniqueness and power of an AI interview

stem from its fundamentally affirmative focus. What distinguishes AI at this phase is that every question is positive” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, pp. 25-26).

Appreciative Inquiry is intended to be used as an organizational approach to evaluate systems, but these questions and the positive framing have great relevance to individuals, as is demonstrated in Chapters III and IV.

The interview and the ensuing dialogue in this search for strengths and life-giving forces provide the career development professional with an opportunity to help the individual develop her or his thoughts in a focused way. It also provides an opportunity to hear what comes through to others in her or his words. In short, Appreciative Inquiry is a strategy for intentional change because it identifies the best of “what is” and “what could be,” a process for engaging people in an effort to choose consciously to seek out inquiry into that which is generative and life enriching; and it is a way of seeing the world that is attentive to and affirming of one’s best and highest qualities.

At the foundation of this Strength-Based Approach to career development are five critical concepts:

1. Each individual has rich, untapped stories that, when accessed through a positively-framed appreciative interview, provide glimpses into important patterns, themes, and life-giving forces.
2. As these surface, self-understanding relative to successes, strengths, passions, energy, and resources comes into greater focus as do the circumstances and people who play supporting roles.
3. With that understanding and focus, one is able to make decisions about which of those positive components to carry forward in planning a future work-life scenario.
4. The future work-life scenario is strengthened by an expanded sense of the conditions, contexts, and people that facilitate drawing on the best and highest qualities.
5. The language used will continue to focus energy in positive ways, helping to choose a reality that draws on strengths and articulates a hopeful future.

Also important to these concepts is an understanding of the underlying definitions supporting this approach.

## **Important Guiding Definitions**

The following definitions are included to clarify the

terms that are used throughout this monograph. They are inserted at this point to enhance the descriptions that follow. The next chapter also provides a more detailed description of Appreciative Inquiry.

### *Appreciative Inquiry (AI)*

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to seeing the world, as well as a process. It “is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives ‘life’ to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000, p. 5).

### *Career*

Defined as the “totality of work — paid and unpaid — one does in a lifetime” (National Career Development Association Web site, <http://www.ncda.org/pdf/Policy.pdf>).

### *Career Development*

“The total constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic, and chance factors that combine to influence the nature and significance of work in the total lifespan of any given individual” (National Career Development Association Web site, <http://www.ncda.org/pdf/Policy.pdf>).

### *Integrative Life Planning (Hansen, 1997)*

A comprehensive career development model, Integrative Life Planning, that brings together many aspects of people’s lives in ways that help them to see the “big picture” of their lives, their communities, and the larger society. It is both a philosophical framework and a set of practical strategies that work in harmony with concepts like connectedness, pluralism, spirituality, subjectivity, wholeness and community. It embraces the notions of patterns as fluid, integrative processes that bring parts together to make a whole and the need for reflection on one’s developmental priorities for mind, body, and spirit.

There are six important principles to Integrative Life Planning: It is a way of seeing the world that takes into account both personal development and the contexts

within which we live by focusing on the values of diversity and inclusivity; examining the relationship goals and achievement goals relative to society, the organization, the family, and the individual; exploring connections and links between work and family; introducing spirituality, meaning, and purpose as key aspects of life planning; and helping people manage change and understand their life choices, decisions, and transitions in a societal context (adapted from Hansen, 1997, pp. 11–18).

### *Life-giving Forces*

Those distinctive strengths that give life and vitality when functioning at your best are life-giving forces (adapted from Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 75). These could include elements or experiences within the past and/or present that represent individual strengths when operating at the very best and could be a single moment in time or any aspect that contributes to the highest points and most valued experiences or characteristics (modified from Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005).

### *Positive Core*

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) describe the positive core of Appreciative Inquiry as “one of the greatest and largely unrecognized resources in the field of change management today” (p. 8). It is derived from the assumption that “every organization and community have many untapped and rich accounts of the positive — what people talk about as past, present, and future capacities, or the positive core” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 8). Through experience and in the context of Appreciative Inquiry, Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) articulated the definition of “positive core” in this:

Human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of the inquiry are positively correlated. The single most important action a group can take to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future is to make the positive core the common and explicit property of all. (p. 9)

### *Positive Possibilities*

Also referred to as “provocative propositions,” positive possibilities are statements that bridge the best of “what is” with a vision of “what might be.” As such, it becomes a written expression of the desired state, writ-

ten in the present tense, to guide planning and success in the future (modified from Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2005, p. 419).

## **Blending Career Development and Appreciative Inquiry**

The blending of career development and Appreciative Inquiry is best articulated by comparing a traditional career development approach (on the individual level) to an organizational systems approach influenced by the Appreciative Inquiry. The goal is to assist an individual in building a plan based on the personal components that are strengths and passions rather than a plan that is centered on working around the barriers. In other words, how do you help individuals create a plan that capitalizes on strengths and manages around weaknesses? This will be considered from career and Appreciative Inquiry perspectives ending in a blended approach.

### **Traditional Approach to Career Development**

This approach is based on the belief that career development emerges from a lifelong dynamic interaction between the individual and environment. As such, that dynamic interaction progresses through a process of self-understanding, an understanding of the world of work, and consequently finding the personal connection to the world of work that leads to satisfying and successful lifelong engagement in both paid and unpaid experiences.

One model for looking at that process involves three dimensions — “who am I?”, “where am I going?”, and “how do I get there?” — through which individuals move over time. The progression in this model is from assessment to exploration to action.

The first dimension, as seen in Figure 1, raises the question “who am I?” This area is where people typically begin. In schools, the result of testing usually leads to a discussion of aptitudes and skills. Next, depending on the outcome of the assessment, decisions are made as a part of the process of planning for the future. For example, a student is assessed in 8th grade, and the results of the assessment are used to help the student develop her or his high school course schedule. The course schedule typically prepares the student to either go on to higher education or to go to work. The extent to which the 8th-grade student (and parents) is involved depends on the teachers and the counselors. The student enters high school, completes the courses, and goes on to the next career step (college or work).

Figure 1. Who Am I?

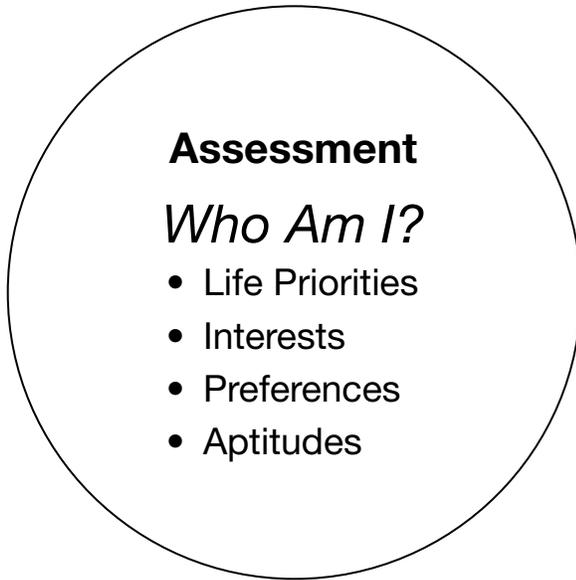
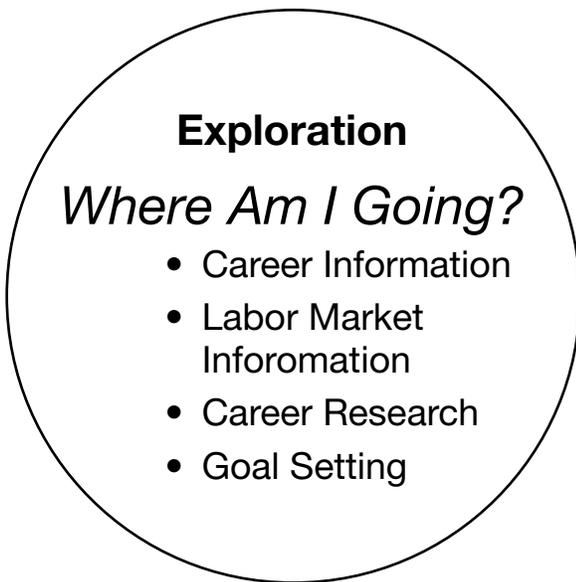


Figure 2. Where Am I Going?



The next dimension in the process is depicted in Figure 2, “Where Am I Going?” It focuses on the acquisition of career- and workforce-related information and the integration of that data with goal setting. Prior to the explosion of the Internet, getting this information was challenging. Now, the information is so readily available that the challenge is knowing how to use the information and discerning useful information from the rest. An example in this area might be a career day in a high school where workers in different fields come

and discuss the requirements, daily tasks, and rewards of their work. The student hears the information and then might set goals.

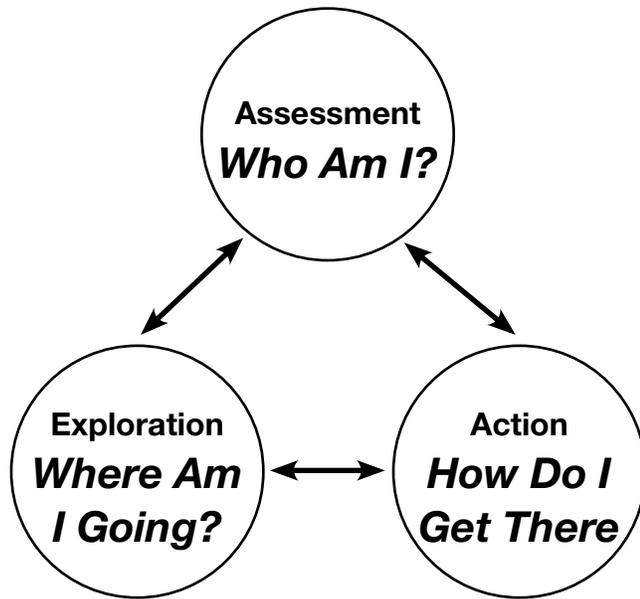
The third dimension, shown in Figure 3, “How Do I Get There?” is seen as the action area. This area might include attending workshops on interviewing or networking and career problem solving when challenges arise. It is also the area where decisions about post-high school training and higher education are discussed. Years ago, the process ended at the action area because employers would typically tailor their employee development programs around “who am I?” The issues of “where am I going?” were also handled by the employer in terms of career ladders within the organization or promotion decisions. More and more today, this process of assessment, exploration, and action has become more cyclical and ongoing, and is often in the hands of individuals rather than the employer.

Figure 3. How Do I Get There?



This approach reflects a more traditional model. When combined together as shown in Figure 4, it also characterizes the process that many people go through to determine their future work life. The process of responding to the three questions has also served as an organizing structure for career centers, career-development product developers, and career-development delivery systems. The Strength-Based Approach to career development utilizes the traditional career development process as a foundational framework with which Appreciative Inquiry is blended.

Figure 4. Career Development Process



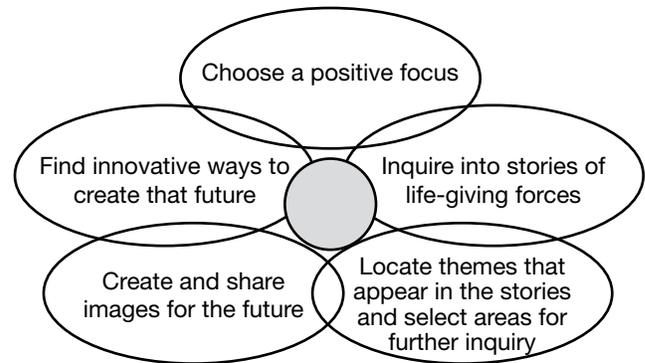
### An Appreciative Inquiry Approach

Watkins & Mohr (2001) identified five core processes that are depicted in Figure 5, “Key Appreciative Inquiry Processes.” Since the language originally was focused on a systems approach, Figure 5 expresses the concepts in terms that are more broad and suited to a focus on individuals so as to fit with the Strength-Based Approach (there has been a slight modification from the original source). The first process centers on choosing a positive focus. This requires choosing to focus energy on identifying the times when things are going well, and avoiding the often natural habit of spotlighting challenges, problems, and tougher times. This process is about identifying and trying to replicate that which is powerful, positive, and potent for the individual. This connects back to the example provided earlier in which we focus our attention on positive or negative feedback following a performance review. It means career development professionals need to work with individuals to move from a problem-solving mode to increasing the focus on understanding individual strengths and passions.

The second process, inquiring into life-giving forces, is the point at which the career development professional engages in an Appreciative Inquiry interview with the individual to explore the patterns, themes, and life-giving forces that emerge. This interview also elicits information used in an analysis of themes in the third process as topics are selected for further explo-

ration. In the approach discussed in this monograph, there is also an opportunity to expand on the examination of themes by using an imagery activity.

Figure 5. Key Appreciative Inquiry Processes



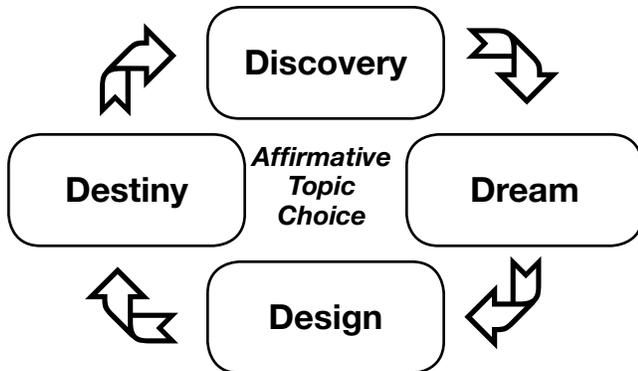
Adapted from Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 40.

Once the themes and life-giving forces have been identified, an image for the preferred future (the fourth process) is created. This draws on the more visual stimuli of the imagery which is then continually regenerated as a support and reminder of the picture of the ideal work-life scenario. This naturally leads into the fifth process of finding ways to create that future. These processes are important as they lay the foundation for the Appreciative Inquiry processes.

Watkins and Mohr (2001) stated that “Appreciative Inquiry’s potential comes from the integration of (1) a practical change process and (2) a new paradigm of how we shape our future” (p. 24). This practical change process is best described by using the 4-D Cycle which is a model that describes the four phases of an Appreciative Inquiry (see Figure 6.). According to Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros (2005), the assumption is that there “is a ‘solution to be embraced,’ rather than a ‘problem to be solved’ ” (p. 5). They continued by describing the cycle in the following way:

It starts with selecting a topic: affirmative topic choice. What follows are *Discovery* (appreciating and valuing), *Dream* (envisioning), *Design* (co-constructing the future), and *Destiny* (learning, empowering, and improvising to sustain the future). These are the essence of dialogue woven through each step of the process. (p.5)

Figure 6. The Phases of the 4-D Cycle



Adapted from Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005, p. 30.

The phases of Appreciative Inquiry demonstrate the systems approach to finding the “best of what is” and implementing a process to build “the best” into future organizational structures. The next section blends the traditional career development process with Appreciative Inquiry to create the Strength-Based Approach.

### The Strength-Based Blended Approach

Overlaying the 4-D Cycle onto the three questions model (“who am I?,” “where am I going?,” and “how do I get there?”) of the career development process creates the framework for the Strength-Based Approach to career development. This works conceptually as both the career development process and the Appreciative Inquiry approach as depicted in the 4-D Cycle each represent a progression through which data are discovered, analyzed, and used for creating action through planning. In the case of career development, the focus is on the individual; in the case of Appreciative Inquiry, the focus is on all the systems in an organization. The Strength-Based Approach embodies the focus on the individual with the positive approach of Appreciative Inquiry to redefine the career development process.

There are a number of assumptions that are necessary for this intersection to be useful.

1. Both individuals and organizations change and grow over time. Sometimes that change relates to identity, sometimes to purpose, and sometimes that change is in response to continuous shifts in the environment. It is helpful to have processes in place to work with the change.
2. Within each person and organization, there are rich, untapped stories that provide insights into what is important. Those insights

are transparent as well as hidden below the surface.

3. There are certain conditions under which both individuals and organizations flourish. It is possible to identify what those conditions are and how to create and sustain those conditions.
4. Where organizations and individuals focus their time, energy, and resources is the direction in which they will tend to head. A change in perspective, for example focusing on the best of what is that gives energy and excitement, might provide an alternative equal (or better) endpoint.
5. Career development and Appreciative Inquiry are complex; therefore, it is important to have a strong sense of the competencies and skills necessary to be successful in the approach chosen.
6. Individuals and organizations do not exist (typically) in isolation, but rather they are engaged at nearly every moment in economic, environmental, and human systems.

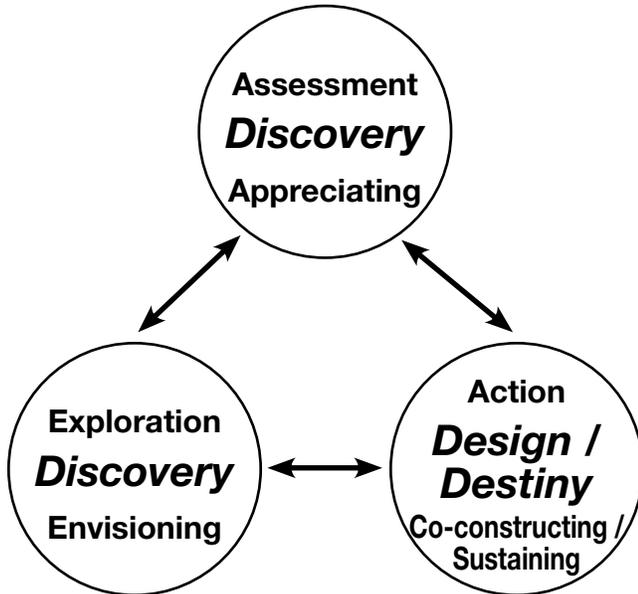
These assumptions are important in that career development and Appreciative Inquiry share common ground that allows the application of the system tool (which is what Appreciative Inquiry is intended to be) to a typically individual process such as career development.

How does this happen? To move to a “strength-based” approach, each of the three circles represented by the questions “who am I?,” “where am I going?,” and “how do I get there?” is linked to the phases described in Appreciative Inquiry’s 4-D Cycle. The career development process and the Appreciative Inquiry approach integrate into a single system (Figure 7, The Strength-Based Approach). In Figure 7, the circles still represent the career development processes and the descriptors within each circle embody an Appreciative Inquiry approach (see Appendix A for a more detailed view). The Strength-Based Approach to career development provides a detailed graphic of the process including the critical questions and focus of each phase of the process.

The “who am I?” question in the career development process transitions to the “discovery” phase from Appreciative Inquiry where the critical question becomes “what gives life?” This transition retains the career development influence of self-understanding and the focus becomes cast in a positive perspective as “appreciating.”

The “where am I going?” question transitions to the “dream” phase, with exploration still the critical task and envisioning the positive framing. Critical questions to be addressed are “what might be?” and “what is the world calling for?”

Figure 7. The Strength-Based Approach



The “where am I going?” question is still action oriented and now captures both the “design” and “destiny” phases. The shift created by applying Appreciative Inquiry modifies the tasks as co-constructing (connected to the design phase) and sustaining (connected to the destiny phase). In the design phase, the critical question is “what should be the ideal?” “How to empower, learn, and adjust/improvise?” is the important question in the destiny phase.

The blending of career development and Appreciative Inquiry and the integration of the developmental processes sets the stage for a Strength-Based Approach to career development using Appreciative Inquiry.

## A Strength-Based Approach to Career Development

The goal of the Strength-Based Approach to career development is to create an action plan that honors a person’s strengths and articulates her or his hopes for the future. The keys to this process are (a) finding the seeds of excellence on which to develop, (b) creating images of excellence in hopes that the individual moves toward those images, and (c) developing a plan that engages all the important people and forces in a person’s life.

## The Process

The purpose of this process is to create a positive self-image and allow the individual to envision even greater possibilities based on strengths. The process also connects work and life decisions to others who serve as life partners and support networks. Chapter III details how this process is engaged; supporting activities can be found in Appendix B.

The process can be used in a group setting such as a workshop (as will be demonstrated in Chapter III) or by career development professionals working with individuals or small groups. This is a brief outline of the process:

- I. Introduction to the Process
- II. Discovery Phase
  - a. The Appreciative Interview
  - b. Images of My Positive Future
- III. Dream Phase
  - a. Locating My Personal Themes
  - b. My Ideal Work-Life Scenario
- IV. Design Phase
  - a. Innovative Ways to Create My Future: My Sequence for Success
  - b. Sequence for Success: Shoulds, Wants, & Will
  - c. Action Plan: My “WILL DO” Goal
  - d. Cultivating My Sequence for Success
- V. Destiny Phase
  - a. Possible Bumps in the Road to Building on My Strengths
  - b. Sustaining My Positive Possibilities
- VI. Valuing the Process of Building on My Strengths

The process detailed here is one of many ways that Appreciative Inquiry can be applied to career development. Each intervention can and should vary according to the needs of the individual and the situation.

The application of this process to a classroom setting will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter III including a more detailed description of the activities.

## A Comparative Look at Other Strength-Focused Approaches

How does this approach compare to developmental assets or other strength-focused materials? Several studies have identified similar processes on which programs have been created. For this discussion, four such structures will be identified: the work on developmental assets by the Search Institute, the Gallup data

reported by Buckingham and Coffman (1999) and later expanded to the individual level by Buckingham and Clifton (2001), and the “Signature Strengths” approach by Peterson and Seligman (2004) which leads to the positive psychology movement.

### *Developmental Assets*

The Search Institute, a non-profit research group based in Minneapolis, Minnesota has been researching the success of young people since the late 1950s. Their research has identified 40 developmental assets important to young people. Benson (2003) described developmental assets as “. . . represent[ing] a theoretical construct identifying a set of environmental and intrapersonal strengths known to enhance educational and health outcomes for children and adolescents” (p. 19). He continued, “The 40 elements in this framework represent a synthesis of multiple research literatures and are purposefully positioned as health-enhancing resources over which communities have considerable control” (p. 19). The Search Institute (2007) described the process: “asset building really isn’t about perfection. It’s about facilitating and helping to nurture the opportunities, skills, relationships, values, and self-perceptions that all young people need and deserve. That foundation of strengths will then help them navigate and thrive in a world that certainly isn’t perfect.”

The 40 assets are divided into four categories of external assets and four categories of internal assets. The external asset categories are support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The internal assets are commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Benson, 2003).

The Search Institute’s developmental assets provide a structure within which schools and communities can share a common language with parents and others concerned about the growth and development of young people today. These assets differ in form and in purpose with the Strength-Based Approach taken in this monograph. The key distinguishing differences are:

- The Search Institute has identified 40 specific assets where the Strength-Based Approach has an undefined and nearly unlimited number of assets.
- The assets are defined by the client or participants in the Strength-Based Approach.
- The purpose of the developmental assets program is for community-based engagement on issues related to schools and young people in

contrast to the Strength-Based Approach’s focus on individual development within the family and other support systems.

- The basis for the information comes from data and research studies for the developmental assets compared to the data coming from individual life experiences in the Strength-Based Approach.

The common ground is creating a positive future.

### *Gallup Data*

Buckingham and Coffman (1999) used 25 years of survey data of more than one million employees, combined with a more specific meta-analysis of data from a 1998 Gallup survey of more than 105,000 employees from more than 2,500 business units, to identify what the best managers do. This data, combined with in-depth interviews with more than 80,000 managers in 400 companies, helped them to identify 12 questions that lead to better understanding of what the world’s greatest managers do.

How does this connect with career development and Appreciative Inquiry?

It connects because among the many findings, Buckingham and Coffman (1999) saw that success was linked to helping employees “become more of who he [sic] already is” (p. 141). Further, they said “Each person is different. Each person has a unique set of talents, and unique pattern of behaviors, of passions, of yearning. Each person’s pattern of talents is enduring, resistant to change. Each person, therefore, has a unique destiny” (p. 141). Buckingham and Clifton (2001) built on that research to delineate the “strengths revolution at work” (p. 3). They wrote, “Faults and failings deserve study, but they reveal little about strengths. Strengths have their own pattern” (p. 3). They continued with the following statement:

To excel in your chosen field and to find lasting satisfaction in doing so, you will need to understand your unique patterns. You will need to become expert at finding and describing and applying and practicing and refining your strengths. . . . Suspend whatever interest you may have in weakness and instead explore the intricate detail of your strengths. (pp. 3-4)

This led them to identifying 34 themes of talent which can be identified by using the StrengthsFinder Profile.

The distinction between Buckingham and

Clifton's (2001) approach and this Strength-Based Approach is seen most clearly in the process. The Strength-Based Approach, as delineated in this monograph, is based on the guided exploration by an individual of her or his experiences. The emerging themes are patterns that do not come from a predetermined list but are constructed by the individual. The difference is fitting one's exploration of experience to an existing list versus developing the list individually. The challenge in the former is figuring out what to do when the individual theme does not fit into the predetermined list. The challenge in the latter is that there are an infinite number of possible undefined categories or themes.

Both approaches are significant in their emphasis on increasing success and satisfaction by focusing on strengths and managing weaknesses.

### *Signature Strengths*

Signature Strengths draws on empirical research in the field of Positive Psychology and "focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses, asserting that happiness is not the result of good genes or luck" (Adolescence, 2004, p. 838). This approach states that individuals are impacted by understanding their Signature Strengths. "Authentic happiness comes from identifying and cultivating your most fundamental strengths and using them every day in work, love, play, and parenting" (Seligman, 2002, p. xiii)

Peterson and Seligman (2004) believe that "character strengths are the bedrock of the human condition and that strength-congruent activity represents an important route to the psychological good life" (p. 4). There are 24 identified "signature strengths" which are combined into six virtues. The virtues are:

- Wisdom and knowledge — cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
- Courage — emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, both external and internal
- Humanity — interpersonal strengths that involve "tending and befriending" others
- Justice — civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
- Temperance — strengths that protect against excess
- Transcendence — strengths that forge con-

nections to the larger universe and provide meaning

(Summarized from Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, p. 412)

With this approach, individuals take an assessment (available online) to receive a Values In Action (VIA) Signature Strengths report identifying the top five strengths to pay attention to and use more often.

The approach shared some similarities with that of Buckingham and Clifton (2001). Both approaches are based on research over the course of many years. While the research questions differed, the results supported a positive approach to career development. Both approaches were also similar in that each has a survey tool that is completed by individuals who then receive a personalized report that categorize their responses.

Positive Psychology is very similar to the Appreciative Inquiry approach as detailed here. Each approach discusses the necessity for a change in the way individuals view the world, and the power and influence of language. One distinction between the two is that one uses a static survey tool, the other uses a dynamic dialogue (the appreciative interview) as the data gathering instrument.

While there are several different approaches that draw on or suggest the use of and focus on strengths, the Strength-Based Approach to career development using Appreciative Inquiry offers a unique method to get to the desired goal. In each of the other assessments and approaches discussed, the focus is on identifying strengths so that they fit into a predetermined set of empirically generated strengths. The Appreciative Inquiry approach is focused on opening rather than narrowing strengths for the purpose of understanding and identifying.

### *Caveats*

As with any approach, competence in the practice of educational or other types of interventions should be carefully considered. It is important to note that it is not recommended that this approach be employed in all situations and with every individual.

There are several caveats that are important to note:

1. This approach is not a tool but rather an approach, and it is not intended to fit every situation.
2. It requires that clients or participants are able to make observations about themselves, their behaviors, and the behaviors of others with respect to the focus of the inquiry.

3. It further requires that any potential language or communication barriers are prepared for in advance because the majority of the activities involve participant interaction.
4. Because this process draws heavily on dialogue with others through the Appreciative Inquiry interview, it is important to be clear with participants about the level of interaction and personal disclosure expectations that are necessary for this to be an effective interaction.
5. There is a cultural bias embedded in this approach: self-knowledge and understanding is important if growth and development is the goal. This is a value that is not necessarily true for all cultures.
6. An individual's behavior does not occur within a vacuum, and society's microsystems and macrosystems impact and contribute to making the achievement of women and people of color potentially more challenging (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). It is important that these influences are acknowledged and not discounted through the use of this approach.
7. It is possible that through the implementation of the Strength-Based Approach, clients, students, or participants may uncover more information or emotion than those using this approach are prepared to ethically and morally manage. It is incumbent upon the career development professional that she or he be prepared to make an appropriate referral to a qualified professional if needed.
8. It is the responsibility of the career development professional, teacher, or facilitator to be knowledgeable in career development theory and practice as well as knowledgeable in the Appreciative Inquiry approach.

It is also important to recognize the importance of an articulated contract between the career development professional and the client or student or participant. Due to the nature of the process discussed here, career development professionals need to be articulate and transparent about the process. The following is an excerpt of a communication that was sent in advance to every participant in a two-session Building on Your Strengths class:

Thank you for your interest in the *Building on Your Strengths* workshop. There have been some inquiries as to the nature of the workshop, so I thought it might be helpful to let you know in advance how the next two meetings will be focused. This email is sent in the interest of being transparent about the process so you can maximize your investment of time.

The workshop combines career development theory with Appreciative Inquiry (a systems tool applied to individual career development in this case). The process for the workshop draws on guided interviews and discussions with other members in the workshop. It is based on the following assumptions: individuals and systems have untapped rich stories; while some approaches identify fixes or deficits that need to be overcome, this process seeks that which is going right and builds on those strengths; language is seen as a powerful source for creating social reality; and conversations continually create new images that lead to new actions and behaviors.

Since this is a bit different than other approaches people have experienced, I want to be clear about what this is not. This workshop is not about utilizing any electronic/Web tools to key in an assessment which then suggests careers for you. It is also not about how to change your job classification or move up in a specific personnel system. It is also not connected to any commercial packages that are available.

If, after reading more about the workshop, it sounds like this will not fit your needs at this time, please feel free to cancel your registration or choose not to attend. The Adult and Student Services Center in the Division of Continuing Studies (<http://www.dcs.wisc.edu/services/>) does offer more specific opportunities to explore career development topics and would be a good resource for career assistance.

Thank you again for your interest. If you have any questions or have special needs that you would like to explore prior to the meeting, please feel free to let me know.

It is important for the implicit and explicit contract between the career development professional and the service user to be clear in advance. This early communication is respectful and demonstrates a level of professionalism that enhances any interaction.

## Summary

This approach is about seeking and identifying those life-giving forces that are present when things are working well, when individuals are working at optimal levels. This approach leads to life-work satisfaction and success. It is also about capturing positive experiences and projecting them into the future through planning.

As a part of this process, each individual reflects on:

- the core factors that enable personal success
- the individual's story as it is being written, unfolding in the presence of a dialogue partner through the interview process
- the learning from experience as the individuals examine closely those moments when they have been at their best
- the most effective practices, strengths, and best qualities necessary to preserve the current situation as changes are made
- how a positive past — the best of experiences — can help the individual to be more daring and innovative when thinking about true potential
- the envisioned future including hopes and positive images
- building a life through positive and inten-

tional planning that integrates the “best of who an individual is” with those with whom that individual shares her or his life

While there are some similarities between the Strength-Based Approach and other approaches using strengths, this approach encourages a change in the focus from a problem solving or deficit model to a positive perspective. This approach uses an interview process to initially gather personal information, and then uses structured learning activities to develop a plan for success. This experience is intended to find what works and to find ways to infuse more of the positive core into an individual's life and work. This journey encourages both the acceptance of a positive perspective as a world view (in contrast to a deficit-based view) and the development of language that supports a positive process for exploring an individual's career development needs.

## Looking Ahead

The next chapter provides information about the Appreciative Inquiry process. Chapter III provides a practical example of the Strength-Based Approach in a classroom setting. The final chapter summarizes a broader perspective and areas to consider in the future.