An Appreciative Approach to Organizational Change in Unions

by

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January 6, 2008

Organizational Change in Unions Panel
**Labor & Employment Relations Association (LERA) 60th Annual Meeting
New Orleans, LA**

Introduction

There is much said and written about the powerful processes transforming the world of work, which affect the ability of long-standing unions to successfully advocate for workers. We are familiar with the litany: globalization; new era-creating technological changes in information, communication, and distribution; new business models transforming production and exchange; intensified migration flows; and the disintegration in the U.S. of a system of legal protections for worker self-organization and collective bargaining. These deep and fundamental environmental changes set the context for the challenges facing workers, their unions, and their leaders.

Currently, I consult with unions and their leaders on organization and leadership development and transformation. I come to this work with a 32-year history in the labor movement and most of it (22 years of it) serving as either an elected leader in executive positions, or as a senior staff leader. My perspective in this discussion is less that of a consultant, or of a labor educator or academic. I come into this conversation mainly as a union leader who has spent much of a lifetime trying to change and transform our organizations at many different levels in order to meet our generation's challenge in the labor movement.

In this paper, first, I want to share my working assumptions about U.S. unions, leadership, and organizational change. Second, I want to briefly outline recent developments in the field of organizational change and transformation that I believe are

powerfully applicable to unions. And, third, I will cite several case examples from my work where I am applying these insights.

Context and Assumptions: U.S. Unions and Change

Assumption 1: to be relevant unions require transformational change. There is a burning need to make this new social, economic, and political world work for workers. And this will happen as a result of some combination of the *transformation* of current organizations and movements, and the spawning of new forms, new organizations, and new movements.

Anderson and Anderson (2001) make a distinction among three types of change organizations engage in response to environmental or marketplace requirements for success. One is *developmental change*, which aims to *improve* what is fundamentally working well. A second, and more complex type of change is *transitional*, where the current state of things do not get us the results we seek, and so we aim to a *fix a problem,* to change an existing operation or strategy, or create something new to meet current or future demands. We know what the outcomes look like, but our current state is not getting us those outcomes, so we need to transition to a new state. The third, and most complex form of change is *transformational*, which is driven by environmental changes so dramatic that they call not just for new forms, but new ways of *being*. These are the kinds of changes that home weavers' guilds faced with the emergence of textile factories, and I would argue, our unions face today. This level of change requires whole new paradigms, new mindsets and behavior, and the outcomes are emergent and not evident at the beginning of the change process.

It is my belief (though beyond the scope of *this* paper) that this is the level of change required by unions today. Our unions were built and designed in a very different world than the one we find ourselves in today. Unions and their leaders need their strategies, what they are about, their approach to the world, and their mindsets and ways of being transformed.

So what will drive this kind of change?

Assumption 2: The pressure on unions driving transformation is weak. There is a story that makes the rounds in organizational change circles about the frog and boiling water. When the frog is thrown into boiling water, it will jump out. But if the frog is

placed in cold water that is slowly brought to a boil, the frog will accommodate and get slowly boiled. The pressures for change for U.S. unions have largely been of the latter type – long-term processes, slowly eroding labor market share, slow loss of leverage, and reactive responses to these changes, which at their very best, slow down these processes.

Not only are the pressures for *immediate* change largely missing, in fact, there are tremendous counter driving forces *preventing* change. Most significant among these is the *inherent* political nature of unions – largely democratic institutions where, structurally, leaders' personal careers, absent *highly* developed leadership and strategic competencies, depends on the short term perceived interests of their current members, at the expense of organizational transformation and addressing the interests of emergent constituents. I would hypothesize that this political pressure for short-term responsiveness to a declining constituency has significantly grown as loss of density moves more and more unions away from expanding rights and raising benefits to defending past gains. A personal observation is that in the earlier years of my union activism, union leadership was much more stable. Successful insurgencies were almost unheard of, and certainly considered remarkable. As the most visible example, look at the AFL-CIO. For more than a hundred years of its history, with a brief exception, it represented the paragon of stability, while in the brief span of the last decade it has witnessed its first challenged election and then a split.

Assumption 3: Developing leaders is the essential strategy for such a necessary transformation. The *absolutely essential factor* capable of overcoming this inertia, this path of least resistance, is highly sophisticated, highly developed, and self-transformed *leaders.* Intentionally and systematically *growing* this type of leadership is a fundamental success strategy for unions.

In the above context, my concern in my own recent work has been developing approaches that support leaders in boldly pursuing their own and their union's transformation. I have been experimenting with an emerging organization change methodology that I hypothesize is particularly appropriate to a union context -- **appreciative inquiry**. I will define appreciative inquiry, and then share some initial experiences using it. While the lessons I draw from the work are only in beginning stages, I am very encouraged by the results.

What Is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative inquiry is an organization change approach b*ased on the basic assumption* that **every organization has something that works well, and that these strengths can be the starting point for creating positive change.** Traditionally, organization change and development approaches focused on seeking out "what is wrong," "what is the problem," and how to fix a deficit. In contrast, appreciative inquiry is based on digging out **what is best** about an organization and its members; what gives the organization vitality; appreciating collective achievements and individual contributions; and on that foundation, defining ambitious visions of where to go.

The initial theorists, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) drew on a wide range of human and social /cultural research which pointed to the power of positive images in human development. They explored what Cooperrider (1990) called "the *heliotropic* propensity in human systems… meant that they exhibit an observable and largely automatic tendency to evolve in the direction of positive anticipatory images of the future."

For example, Cooperrider (1990) points to medical research on the *placebo effect,* and the implications of patients' *belief* that they are being given an effective remedy resulting in physiological and emotional improvement in symptoms by one-third to two-thirds of patients. "The placebo response is a fascinating and complex process in which projected images, as reflected in positive belief in the efficacy of a remedy, ignite a healing response that can be every bit as powerful as conventional therapy (p.33)."

Similarly is the "Pygmalion effect." The classic study is where one group of teachers is led to believe that their students possess exceptional high potential, while another group is led to believe that their students are inferior. Students randomly assigned to these two groups over a sustained period of time demonstrate clear and measurable differences. These "self-fulfilling prophecy" experiments have been duplicated hundreds of times (Cooperrider, 1990). So in this instance, one's image (positive or negative) of the other has powerful impact.

Along these same lines, the writers explored the relationship between images and impact from many different angles into human systems: ranging from studies on the relationship between negative affect and disease; to the role of visualization in athletic

success; to the rise and fall of cultures and studies identifying how everything society considered a social advance (such as social security, universal suffrage, and the trade union movement) has prefigured first in some utopian writing.

While the foundational research is almost 20 years old, the organizational applications have been rapidly spreading over the past decade. I will briefly describe three examples using appreciative inquiry in my work with unions.

Transformational Change with Private Sector Union

The Union: I started work with a large, private sector local viewed as an influential and very well run organization. The union has successfully maintained its membership numbers (slight decline) largely through a combination of aggressively defending current jobs, internal mergers, and some organizing outside its core industry. The union has a reputation for negotiating excellent contracts, providing excellent membership servicing, having excellent staff, plenty of resources, and being an activist union that leads the broader labor movement in their area.

The presenting issue: The union approached me about designing and facilitating a staff retreat. The leadership of the local was in transition as the former president had retired, and a new team took the helm. I asked the new president, "What do you want to achieve?" The initial answer was the hope that a retreat would help regroup the staff, and help them think about where they were going in the future. The conversation that started with the retreat expanded to a discussion about what the new leadership team wanted to achieve over the long range, during their tenure.

The challenge: The union was clearly in the midst of "boiling frog syndrome." Most significantly, in the past 15 years it lost its entire core market in one of its two geographic jurisdictions, and was starting to see the same process unfold in the other. In another 10 years they expected to have their entire core jurisdiction go non-union. In addition, there were huge changes in demographics (young people and new immigrants) in both the union and non-union sectors of their jurisdiction that the union had no internal capacity to effectively address.

Previous deficit orientation: My previous orientation, and the traditional organizational change approach would be to launch a diagnostic action research to identify "what is wrong/what is the problem?" I could have very quickly made a list:

- No real organizing program – the union's Organizing Department is focused on internal mobilizations around contract fights, which tend to be of a defensive nature;
- The leader – a micro-manager, super-critical, over-bearing;
- Major diversity issues (age, language);
- Many internal tensions – since the kept their numbers up through mergers, there were divisions among cliques rooted in previous locals; there was a lot of back-biting; people not feeling appreciated;

In fact, there were plenty of things that "needed fixing!"

Appreciative Inquiry: Given the dilemma of a very well run organization without immediate pressure to change, but critical long-term challenges, I chose to explore using an appreciative approach. Cooperrider's and his colleagues' work spawned and encouraged experimentation with appreciative processes and approaches to organizational work. "Appreciative inquiry," a specific, and the main, variant of these, is a theory of organizing and method of changing social systems. It is a form of "action research" where the members of a system themselves become co-researchers into their own system.

I proposed to the union's executive committee that we use appreciative inquiry as the approach to the retreat. "This is an organization development approach," I explained, "that is optimistic, and identifies and builds on the union's and its people's strengths." I decided to use the appreciative inquiry approach called the "4-D Cycle" -- *discovery, dream, design, and destiny* (Cooperrider, et. al., 2005). The leadership team agreed to try this approach for the retreat. One concern they had was that "by emphasizing the positive so much staff would think we are trying to avoid problems and controversies." I explained that the methodology would be explained to the staff, and that the staff would have opportunities to raise what they viewed as challenges and concerns.

We identified the following goals for the retreat:
- Develop a unified sense of the legacies, achievements, distinctive strengths, and best practices of the local, its leaders, and its staff;
- Analyze the local's environment;
- Explore the future and articulate the long-term vision for the local;
- Begin to set goals and priorities for the coming two years;
- Build the unity and commitment of the local's staff team;

- Lay the groundwork for identifying, planning and implementing changes after the retreat.

So how does it work? We start out with selecting an **affirmative topic choice**: A basic tenet of appreciative inquiry is that organizations move in the direction that we most frequently and systematically ask questions about.

The question can be small – "how do we effectively mobilize our members?" Or "how do we address staff morale?"). Or it can be large – "what is our future vision and strategy?"

The main topic choice with this local was looking at the next chapter in their history–clarifying and unifying around a bold vision and strategic direction for the local --- and taking the necessary steps to line up the organization to achieve this.

The first step of the 4-D cycle is **discovery,** where I helped the local identify what is going right, what is energizing, what is best about the organization and its people. This started out through individual interviews before the retreat, and culminated in the retreat. Through this process the leaders and staff identified what is the best in the local. They explored "peak moments," specific moments when they felt proudest of being part of this organization. They also explored their own specific contributions and gifts. We launched the retreat with people sharing peak experiences. The result of this was energizing, inspiring, individually and collectively affirming, confidence generating, and a moving unifying experience. It was clear they had achieved *tremendous* victories, had surmounted *incredible* obstacles, and had done the unimaginable. I then formed groups by "Peak experience" (based on whether they revolved around the same situation – like a contract campaign – or a similar theme – like winning organizing campaigns). The groups were assigned to identify the "elements of success" from the greatest moments in their group. This process developed a systematic and shared understanding of what was their best and, therefore, needed to be taken into the future.

Most of the retreat was taken up by the second step – **dreaming.**   This took participants through a process of imagining, in great detail, incredible success in 10 years. What did the local achieve? For their members and workers in their industry? For their staff? For their international union and the rest of the labor movement? For their state and the country? Starting with individual visions, and then working to meld them into a collective vision they articulated a powerful "vision of success."

One thing I found particularly interesting is that many of the elements that people came up with would likely be resisted if a leader unilaterally articulated and attempted to implement them. For example, business agents who are focused on servicing and had continuously raised the need for more servicing staff, when asked to be in the role of figuring out the future of the local and what needs to be done, advocated for concentrating resources in regaining market share which would reduce servicing staff. They came to conclusions that they otherwise would have resisted.

The third phase of the 4-D process took place after the retreat and continues today – the **design** step – building on the strengths identified in discovery, and the vision created in dreaming, **design** is creating the organization capable of achieving the vision.

Implementing this "vision of success" requires a radical departure from current work. But it is being approached with greater unity, solidarity, self-confidence and low defensiveness – collectively and individually – than has typically been my experience in change projects.

The fourth step, **destiny**, is what results from the actual activity generated through the above process.

The conversation started through this process, and continued through subsequent work, has been transformative for the local. The launch of the process lifted up what is the best about the organization and its individuals' contributions. It created new energy and optimism. It stimulated vision and creativity, which is transforming what the organization is doing and achieving. It disarmed defensiveness. It mitigated leadership tendencies to look for blame and root causes of problems. And as staff members have been affirmed and validated, there is lower resistance to change among individuals and groups. Most significantly, it is transforming the organizations entire approach to what they need to be about in their imagined future.

Detailing and explaining the specific and measurable changes and achievements of the local are beyond this paper. But in the past year, they have made significant breakthroughs on all aspects of their vision, including organizing, and defending and expanding their market share.

Appreciative Inquiry in a troubled organization

But how effective is this approach in a highly troubled, conflict, and crisis-ridden organization? In my work with a large, crisis-ridden, public sector local, critical elements of this situation were the following:

- The local's members work for a repressive, extremely militaristic and punitive management;
- The local is permeated with extremely divisive and destructive, long-standing internal divisions
- The organization's culture is conflictive and harsh, mistrustful and secretive, and anything but appreciative.
- The organization's internal management/staff relations, mirror in remarkable ways those of the agency with which they battle.

Presenting issue: The leaders of this union *did not* approach me looking for organizational development help. They wanted a skilled pair of hands to put out fires. That was the entrance into a conversation about their challenges and frustrations and how I could be helpful. My initial sense was that the organization was suffering from what Peter Senge (1990) calls "organizational learning disabilities." I noted the leaders' propensity to see the "problems" to be "out there," located outside themselves, and their inability to see how *they* were part of the system producing undesirable results.

We agreed to set up a broad staff advisory committee (including union supervisory and non-supervisory staff), and I would help them organize a conversation to figure out what needed to happen in the organization. I decided to use an appreciative action-research methodology.

In this instance, the approach was not so much a systematic appreciative inquiry 4-D Cycle, but rather an *appreciative* organizational development *process*. This is best described by quoting Gervase Bushe, a leading theorist and practitioner of appreciative process, reflecting on his practice of organizational development:

> We may find that the notion of "appreciative process"… as a consulting and change strategy has a larger and more lasting impact than large-scale appreciative inquiries. My personal consulting style has undergone a radical transformation in the past 6 years as I have struggled to adopt an appreciative stance in my work. Now I pay attention to what is working well, the qualities of leadership or group process that I want to see more of, and try to amplify them

when I see them. This is in direct contrast to my training where I learned to see what was missing and point that out. In the past I focused on understanding the failures and pathologies of leadership and organization. I thought that awareness was the first step in development and so I felt it was my job as an OD consultant to make people aware of just how bad things really were. Now I am focusing on helping people become aware of how good things are, on the genius in themselves and others, on the knowledge and abilities they already have, on examples of the future in the present. From this stance I am finding that change happens more easily, people don't get as bogged down in uncertainty or despair and energy runs more freely (1995).

The union in this situation was calling for help "solving problems," and was riven with intense and bitter internal conflicts. The appreciative process involved starting out on a quest for what was the best, what *was* working well, what were peak moments in the organization, what were individuals' unique and special contributions? With this framing, the inquiry also sought to identify what *challenges* participants observed. This approach identified meaningful processes that *were* working well. Most significantly it helped leaders and organization members look with significantly lower resistance at skills they needed to learn, and processes they needed to set up.

In the first case, we had a high performing organization whose world had dramatically changed and was on a long-term decline. But in this first case, there were a clear sense of a competent and effectively run organization. In this second case, the immediate record was more troubled, which obscured the very real victories, and the parts of the organization that were working well. With the appreciative process, leaders could identify instances that suggested the success that was possible; that capacities *already* existed that could be amplified and spread. The intervention in this situation demonstrated to me that an appreciative approach did not require as a prerequisite an already highly functional situation.

Efforts at Transformation in a Tradition-Bound Union

The third situation involved a national union of professional workers. This union, like all unions, also faced a qualitatively transformed environment. Their sector has seen dramatic changes, including how the work is performed, and ownership patterns (from small enterprises to powerful corporations). The union has lost complete control over worker entry into the workforce (which it used to have), and the industry was quickly and broadly expanding outside its bargaining relationships. Yet the success of the union lay

in its ability to set craft standards for the profession, a success that obscured the fact that the industry was reorganizing itself out from under those standards. Again, the slowly boiling frog syndrome was at play.

The leadership of the union went through a major generational transition, with visionary new leadership who was aware of the need for major organizational transformation. The new leadership immediately ran into major resistance around the smallest effort to do *anything differently*, whether it was the order of the agenda or the arrangement of chairs at Board meetings! A total and complete tradition straitjacket characterized the culture of this union. The new leader reported at one point exploding in anger from being told one time too many by incumbent staff "You can't do that!"

It is in this context that the new leadership sought help in finding a way to help the union respond to a changed environment.

The first phase of this work involved launching an organization wide "strategic conversation." And the starting point of the conversation was the question, "What is the best of our Union?" As the organization prepares to undertake a major transformational process, its history and tradition was acknowledged, affirmed, and respected. This is not a question of tipping the hat to tradition, or a "technique" to "making people feel good." It is a genuine process of understanding what is vital, what has worked, what is valued, what needs to be taken into the future. It allows the organization and its members to know that "the baby won't be thrown out with the bathwater."

The first phase of this project was a tremendous success. It transformed the processes for internal dialogue in the organization at multiple levels. It created a unified determination to proceed with this effort to transform the organization into what workers will need in this sector's emerging world.

Bushe/Kassam Study

Several years ago, Bushe and Kassam (2005) conducted a very significant meta-case analysis of appreciative inquiry that has tried to examine the impact, outcomes, and specific interventions used to achieve these outcomes and long-term impact. The authors examined twenty case studies of organization change efforts using Appreciative Inquiry. The cases were divided into those that resulted in transformative changes (defined as

having achieved a qualitative state of change) and those that created a new process, or non-transformative change.

An example of a case study with transformative change involved GTE. About 10 years ago GTE, in collaboration with the union, trained thousands of employees in appreciative inquiry and encouraged employees to make change happen with specific dramatic results (over 10,000 innovations in one year attributed to this effort). The non-transformative change case studies involved situations where new processes or plans were developed and implemented without changing the basic nature of the system.

The study also identified which of the different elements of appreciative inquiry principles and methods discussed in the literature were clearly evidenced and practiced in the case studies. Thus, each case was coded for the nature of change achieved (transformative or non-transformative), and the presence or absence appreciative inquiry principles and methods. Of the twenty cases, seven were assessed to be transformative, and thirteen were not. Across the board, the case studies evidenced the utilization of formal appreciative inquiry approaches.

But the researchers identified several consistent elements in all of the transformative cases that were absent in the non-transformative cases. All the transformative cases had several factors in common. Most salient among them were:

- In the transformative cases, there was a collective creation of new knowledge – new realms of possibility became open to consideration – and through these, new avenues for action that previously could not be considered;

- "Generative metaphors or images" – some kind of common reference point was established that held an agreed upon meaning for group members. These metaphors were both commonly understood, but provocative, challenging, and thus calling for new action.

- Finally, the changes generated in the transformational cases tended to be of an improvisational character. In these cases there were numerous, spontaneous and diverse ideas for change that were linked together in a deeper fundamental change on how the organization was viewed and functioned.

In both of the first two cases identified in this paper, I see clear examples of new knowledge and generative metaphors and images. The third case is too early in the change process to have such changes already be evident.

In the case of the troubled public sector union there were several insights gained from the initial reflection process that definitely constitute new knowledge and generative images. I should note that some of these insights have not specifically emerged out of the examination of "strengths." However, I believe the insights were made possible because of the affirming foundation laid by the exploration of what is the best of the organization, and the exploration of "peak experiences" which are rich, heartfelt, historic, and of tremendous impact. This exploration has reaffirmed a collective sense of the significance of what they have done and of the individual and collective dedication and sacrifice that made it possible.

An example of the process is that one of the leaders' major frustrations focuses on members who have become union staff, and how they work as if they are still working for this anti-worker agency. But the exploration led to the graphic insight that it's not only the staff *working* like they are in the agency, but the union management also *manages* as if they were the agency, creating a destructive vicious cycle. This has led to the generative image that "we need to work and manage with union values not [Agency] values!"

Conclusions

I, like many other determined advocates and agents of change in the labor movement, spent years trying to motivate change by convincing labor organizations that they/we are on the precipice of extinction. I am convinced that this approach is self-defeating, de-energizing, demobilizing, resistance creating, and fundamentally ineffective.

I am convinced that bringing the art, theory and extensive practice of leadership development and organizational change is *crucial* to the desperately needed transformation of our labor movement. I don't believe it is possible without it. In that context, I am finding in my study and practice that appreciative inquiry is a particularly promising approach.

I believe there are several reasons that make this so:

One, this approach generates the energy, enthusiasm, and **motivation** for change where there are not the immediate, short-term drivers.

Two, it affirms people and organizations in a way that disarms resistance to change. People feel understood. I have seen so many change processes where the targets of change felt that those driving the change were clueless about the reality they faced. This change process builds on a genuine, appreciative effort to fully understand what is … to appreciate the baby and not throw it out with the bath water.

Three, it is *absolutely* ideal for the highly **politicized organizations** which our unions are. A conversation that goes – "look how great we are – what great things do we want to achieve next," is likely to go much further than the one that goes "what do we change to fix how screwed up we are?"

This is an approach that is respectful of leaders, organizations, and their members … and that exhibits genuine wonderment and respect for what collective human activity is able to achieve.   There is a great deal to be amazed by what workers and their unions have accomplished. It is a great gift to help these critical organizations use these strengths and achievements as a launching pad for transformation so they can continue playing their critical role in our world.

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