

Executive Summary
Conversations Worth Having
Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel Productive and Meaningful Engagement
by Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres

Conversations are the heart of how we interact. We are almost always engaged in either internal dialogue or external interaction. How often are those conversations worth having? We've heard from countless numbers of people who long for positive change in their lives, communities, organizations, and the world. They are tired of meaningless interactions and conversations about change that are negative, drag everyone down, zap energy, and then nothing happens. They are weary of wasting time on conversations that focus on what's wrong without producing any actionable results. They long for meaningful engagement that builds connection, fuels productivity, and generates positive change.

Conversations Worth Having is about those meaningful conversations. It is about how to have conversations that are productive while strengthening relationships and generating possibilities for a future that works for everyone and helps people succeed at their goals and dreams. Conversations worth having energize people even when solving problems. They foster efficiency, fuel meaningful engagement, and generate creative possibilities. They matter because they inspire cooperative action that has a positive impact for individuals, organizations, and communities.

The practices we recommend stem from Appreciative Inquiry (AI), one of the most widely used approaches for fostering positive change in groups and organizations. AI is grounded in the notion that we create each moment, and ultimately our social systems, through conversation and shared meaning-making. Given that, why not have conversations that create social systems that help us thrive? We show you how.

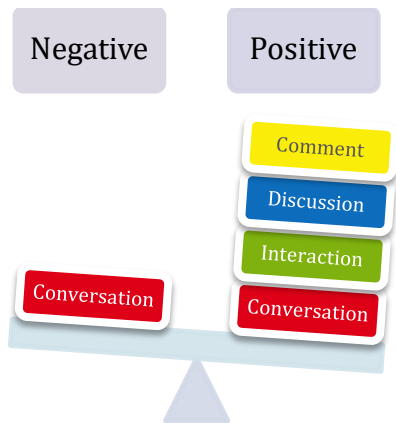
In addition, we have brought together the research behind this work to assure even the most skeptical that the practices, principles, and tools are evidence-based. Neuropsychology, neurophysiology, positive psychology, and positive organization scholarship have all shown that positivity gives people access to higher order thinking, creativity, self-motivation, and relational capacity. Studies vary on the needed ratio of positive to negative interactions, ranging from 3 to 1¹, 5 to 1², to 6 to 1.³ We've collapsed the data to recommend a 4 to 1 ratio, the 80/20 rule. Aiming to engage in *conversations worth having* 80% of the time creates a culture of positivity, engagement, and excellence. These practices and tools have been widely and successfully used in the business world as well as the world of healthcare, education, and community change leading to innovation, improved customer satisfaction, increased retention, employee satisfaction, and improved financial outcomes. What might happen for you if you fostered conversations worth having in your organization?

¹ Barbara Fredrickson, "The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions," *American Psychologist*, 56 (2001): 218-226, and Barbara Fredrickson, *Positivity* (New York: JMF Books, 2009).

² John Gottman, *What Makes Marriages Succeed or Fail* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

³ Marcial Losada and Emily Heaphy, "The Role of Positivity and Connectivity in the Performance of Business Teams: A Nonlinear Dynamics Model," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47, 6 (February 2004): 740-765

Cultivating a Healthy and Uplifting Climate



Research shows that positivity (a climate of openness, interest, curiosity, love, caring, happiness, etc.) supports engagement, high performance, employee and customer satisfaction, retention, learning, appropriate risk-taking, trust, and overall effectiveness. They also show that leaders who energize others are four times more effective. Not every conversation has to be positive or appreciative. The key is on-balance, having a culture where 75-80% of the interactions fuel positivity.⁴

The Nature of Our Conversations

Conversation is a constant in our lives; it is almost like breathing. Whether it's our internal dialogue or our interactions with people, the nature of our conversation is far more important than we know. We all experience the impact conversations have on us, but we may not realize how much influence they have on our well-being and our capacity to thrive, individually and collectively.

There are four basic kinds of conversations:

1. Conversations that add value through appreciative questions and dialogue. We call these *Conversations Worth Having*.
2. Conversations that add value through appreciative comments and statements. We call these *Affirmative Conversations*. These are also worth having, to a point.
3. Conversations that devalue through depreciative questions and defensive interactions. We call these *Critical Conversations*. These conversations may be worth having, to a point.
4. Conversations that devalue through depreciative comments and statements. We call these *Destructive Conversations*. These are not worth having.

Nature of Conversation	Inquiry Based	Statement Based
Appreciative (Adds Value)	Conversations Worth Having	Affirmative Conversations
Depreciative (Devalues)	Critical Conversations	Destructive Conversations

What kind of conversations are you having?

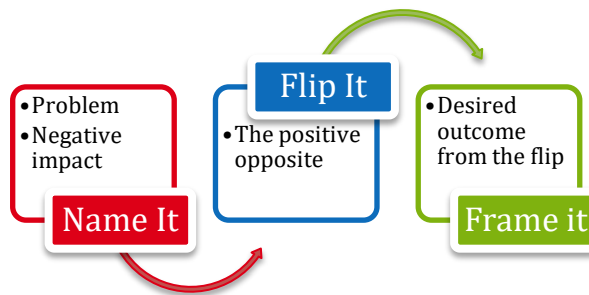
⁴ Stavros, J. and Torres, C. (2018). *Conversations Worth Having: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel Productive and Meaningful Engagement*. Oakland, CA: Berrett Koehler Publishers. Chapter 5.

Turn Interactions into *Conversations Worth Having*—Any Time, Any Place, Any Situation

Two simple practices will let you turn any conversation into a conversation worth having.

Positive Framing

Positive framing is about intentionally shaping a conversation to focus on a desirable outcome and to energize engagement to produce positive results. A positive frame draws people in and inspires



curiosity, imagination, and interest. This should not be mistaken for focusing only on the positive. Quite the contrary, this is about dealing with even the toughest issues in a way that motivates everyone to find creative solutions and take action. We offer a tool, *Flipping*, to help you take any problem or challenge and create a positive frame. This is a simple three-step approach to move from a negative, deficit-based frame to a positive frame, allowing you to work towards

solutions by engaging in conversations worth having. The three steps are:

- **Name It.** What is the problem, complaint, or the thing you don't want?
- **Flip It.** What is the positive opposite, the thing you do want?
- **Frame It.** What is the positive impact if the flip is true; what is the desired outcome?

Generative Questions

Adopt an attitude of curiosity about life. When we are genuinely curious, we naturally ask generative questions. Such questions:

- Make room for diverse and different perspectives. *How do you see it?*
- Surface new information and knowledge. *How did they manage this process at your previous place of work?*
- Stimulate creativity and innovation. *What might be possible if we . . . ?*

When dealing with any issue, even difficult issues, generative questions make unseen information visible and result in conversations that create trust, positive energy, and the transformative power to move the system forward in a desired direction. The result: new ways for solving complex problems and compelling images for collective action.

What Generative Questions Can Do

Elicit information, stories, ideas, and perspectives
Tap experience
Allow strengths to show up
Show us best practices and elements of success
Move toward solutions or to information and data that inform possible solutions
Identify new ways of thinking, new possibilities, opportunities, and aspirations
Inform what we might do, the results we might want
Make room for new knowledge, creativity, and innovation
Deepen connections
Strengthen relationships
Engage those on the sidelines
Generate Understanding

The Appreciative Inquiry Principles: Five Rules for Successful Practice

1. **Constructionist Principle.** We create our social reality through conversation.

Therefore...

Hold your beliefs lightly. Make room for new knowledge, new ways of seeing and understanding.



2. **Principle of Simultaneity.** Change happens the moment we speak or ask a question.

Therefore . . .

Talk in ways that are mutually respectful and affirming. Ignite energy and reinforce positivity.

3. **Anticipatory Principle.** We move in the direction of our thoughts; we look and listen for what we expect.

Therefore . . .

Stay open, anticipate the best from others; expect to be pleasantly surprised!



4. **Poetic Principle.** There is always more than one way to see and understand any person, thing, or situation.

Therefore . . .

Look for what's working, what's best, and what's possible.

5. **Positive/Generative Principle.** Questions stimulate thought and imagery. The more positive the question, the bolder the image, the more positive the action.

Therefore . . .

Ask the most positive and inspiring questions you can.



To order the book or schedule a speaker or training, visit our website at conversationsworthhaving.today. You can also contact Cheri Torres at ctorres@innovationpartners.com or Jackie Stavros at jstavros@comcast.net.