LEVERAGING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Organisational culture discourse mandates a linear approach of diagnosis, measurement and gap analysis as standard practice in relation to most culture change initiatives. Therefore, a problem solving framework geared toward "fixing" and/or realigning an organisation's culture is usually prescribed. The traditional problem solving model seeks to identify gaps between current and desired organisational cultural states, inhibiting the discovery of an organisation's unique values and strengths, namely its cultural capital. In pursuit of discovering and leveraging organisational cultural capital, a descriptive case study is used to show how an Appreciative Inquiry process can rejuvenate the spirit of an organisation as a system-wide inquiry mobilises a workforce toward a shared vision.

Key words
Organistaional cultural capital, action research, appreciative inquiry, descriptive case study

Aligned strategically, organisational culture: "(the) values or social ideas and the beliefs that organisational members come to share" (Smith, 2001, p. 59), is recognised as a potential source of a sustainable competitive advantage (Ellson, 2004) and as such can be viewed as organisational capital. Although the concept of organisational culture has been widely researched (Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson, 2000; Peters & Waterman, 1982), the topic of organisational cultural capital has received scant attention in behavioural science literature. An exploration of organisational culture as a resource to be capitalised on serves as the foundation for this study.

Culture

As paradigms shift, so too expands the base of cultural associations. From the cultivation of animals and crops, religious worship (cults), and from sixteenth to nineteenth century references to the improvement of the individual human mind and society as a whole (civilisation), history has vastly expanded the scope of cultural influence (Smith, 2001).

During the twentieth century, culture has been referred to predominantly as:
1. "the intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development of an individual, group or society",
2. "the arts", and
3. "the entire way of life, activities, beliefs, and customs of a people, group or society" (Smith, 2001, p. 2).

The concept of culture was first used within the organisational context in the 1970s (Hofstede, 1991). However, this contextual transition engendered much uncertainty and confusion associated with the term organisational culture. In fact, Schein (1985) was convinced that conceptual and systematic confusion was intimately linked to the concept of organisational culture. Schein stated that organisational culture is an outcome of external pressure, internal potential and to some degree chance factors, and is "nothing less than the correct way to perceive, to think about, and to feel in relation to both external and internal problems" (p. 11). Ellson (2004) defined organisational culture as the "social or normative glue that holds an organisation together ... manifested by symbolic devices such as myths, stories, legends, and specialized language" (p. 59), whereas Hofstede (1991) stated that organisational culture was "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one organisation from another" (p. 180).

Conceptual and semantic confusion associated with organisational culture definitions compound the challenge of applying culture to the organisational context (Schein, 1985). Schein found that culture is often oversimplified and misunderstood due to:

- a failure to understand the dynamic consequences of cultural phenomena;
- an overemphasis on the process of cultural learning (socialisation) and insufficient emphasis on the content of what is actually learned;
- confusing parts of culture with the cultural whole; and
- confusing surface manifestations of a culture within the underlying pattern or cultural core.

By definition, organisational culture is a fuzzy concept (Hofstede, 1991), and as Schein (1985) would say, a deep phenomenon that is complex and difficult to understand.

Schein (1985) highlighted the influence of the internal and external environment on shaping organisational culture. The internal environment comprises, amongst others, the individual and his/her interactions with colleagues. By nature humans are complex in terms of mental programming (Hofstede, 1991) and operate within organisations characterised with uncertainty, unpredictability and complexity, of which the external environment comprises a volatile, global and culturally hybrid economy. It seems that a paradigm of complexity has transposed a linear and mechanical view of organisations and culture. Linearity implies predictability, certainty and assurance of outcomes, while complexity as defined by Rihani (2002) refers to systems as incorporating many internal elements that interact to produce stable, but evolving, global patterns. This suggests that organisational culture is a complex phenomenon whose boundaries transcend linear thinking.

Furthermore, organisational culture is internal, unconscious and unseen (Schein, 1985). This implies that unique and organisation-specific attributes constitute an organisation's culture and therefore can be classified as a resource of competitive advantage. Schein suggested that it is precisely these unique organisational attributes which should form the heart of organisational cultural studies.

In studying organisational culture, Schein (1985) identified three levels, namely artifacts, values and basic assumptions. *Artifacts* comprise the organisation's physical and social environment and are best discovered through dialogue and observations. *Values* refer to those principles and standards that are valued by the employees, and *basic assumptions* are the underlying cognitive structures that determine how group members perceive, think and feel. Schein emphasised that organisational culture, at any one of these three levels, could constrain strategy and found that "more and more management consultants...are noting explicitly that because 'culture constrains strategy' a company must analyse its culture and learn to manage within its boundaries or, if necessary, change it"

(p. 33). This is evident in today's global and volatile economy where the notion that culture may become a drawback on the organisation (Kilmann, 1985) seems to be the view that many consultants have adopted in pursuit of financial gains.

Framed in the negative, this seemingly problem-oriented view toward organisational culture is tantamount to a deficit-based approach to culture change, while its potential as a resource to be capitalised remains inhibited. Moreover, within what has been framed as a depreciative[1] paradigm, leveraging culture toward sustaining a competitive advantage may seem misplaced and as such does not live up to South's (Glidewell, 1986) view that organisations need to develop a positive culture that will be competitive. A deficit approach could also limit the conscious and deliberate search for what organisations do well (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000). From a deficit stance, how is it possible to embrace Hofstede's (1991) view in recognising cultural strengths as a fundamental source of competitive advantage?

A resource is classified as a competitive advantage, if:
● its dimensions are difficult for competitors to imitate;
● it possesses rare and unique qualities;
● it is cumulative or generates upward momentum;
● its sources are interconnected to form part of a whole; and
● it can be renewed faster than eroded (Luthans & Youssef, 2004).

Organisational culture may therefore be viewed as a potential source of competitive advantage which should be capitalised on.

Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu, a distinguished French sociologist in cultural theory and cultural research, coined the term cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1993) cultural capital comprises several dimensions, for example, formal qualifications, cultural tastes and preferences, knowledge of the arts, as well as cultural skills and know-how. Bourdieu defined cultural capital as "a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artifacts" (p. 7).

Through his research, Bourdieu (1993) maintained that cultural capital was influenced by social location and that it therefore distinguished social divisions. In addition, Barker (2004) differentiates cultural capital from economic capital (wealth) and social capital (whom you know) on the basis of power. Bourdieu explains how the elite French society strived to maintain their power and status by preserving the value of their skills and knowledge by distinguishing the refined, intellectual, and enduring high cultures from the popular and trivial cultures.

Cultural capital "acts as a social relation within a system" (Barker, 2004, p. 37) and is embedded in one's sense of self. Bourdieu (1993) found that cultural capital is accumulated through a long process of acquisition within the social system. Similarly social systems, like organisations, foster unique cultures shaped by the chief executives officer's (CEO) values (Hofstede, 1991), which according to Kilmann (1985) are reflected in employee behaviour throughout the organisation. This notion was reinforced by Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000), who suggested that the CEO's treatment of his/her employees will in all probability be mirrored across the organisation. In summary, organisational cultural capital matures incrementally over time (Glidewell, 1986).

Organisational Cultural Capital

Barrett (1998) applied the concept of cultural capital to the organisational context, and defined organisational cultural capital as the value attached to the collective mental programming (values, beliefs and behaviours) of the organisation that supports its relationship with its employees, customers and society. Barrett highlighted key features of organisational cultural capital, namely its volatile nature, the

idea that it is difficult to create yet easy to lose, and even though organisational cultural capital is not recorded on the balance sheet, Barrett maintained that it has the potential to generate a significant impact in terms of market value. Barrett also found that organisational cultural capital could be measured. However, literature reviews are limited in terms of practical measures of cultural strengths, and quantitative studies of organisational culture are not necessarily convincing (Hofstede, 1991).

Traditional organisational culture measures adopt a diagnostic approach to analysis which is based on two assumptions:
1. Lewin's (1946) 'unfreeze-change-freeze' model, which implies that an organisation can be disrupted from its initial equilibrium state during which it is changed, then allowed to re-settle at a new equilibrium state; and
2. that managers and consultants, through effective analysis, proper planning and appropriate action, can guarantee an outcome and make organisations change (Steel, 2000).

Steel (2000) challenged these assumptions on the basis of complexity theory and proposed that a focus on the narrative (daily conversations) should form the foundation of organisational culture interventions. Steel found that a complexity approach – which suggests that when there is enough connectivity between employees, change is likely to occur spontaneously – offers a better chance of favourable outcomes than a conventional mechanical approach to change.

However, this seems not to deter the current practice of adopting systematic and analytical approaches to "produce data that can be analysed through multivariate techniques" (Ashkanasy et al., 2000, p. 133). Thus the dominant paradigm from which most cultural change interventions are initiated remains to be that of deficit-based problem solving.
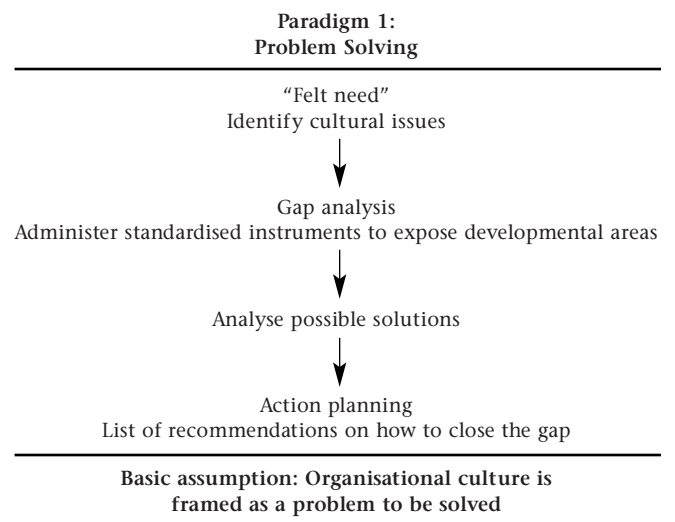
Paradigm 1:
Problem Solving

"Felt need"
Identify cultural issues

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Gap analysis
Administer standardised instruments to expose developmental areas

↓

Analyse possible solutions

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Action planning
List of recommendations on how to close the gap

Basic assumption: Organisational culture is framed as a problem to be solved

Figure 1: Problem solving paradigm (derived from Coopperrider & Whitney, 200, p.23)

In measuring organisational cultural capital, Barrett (1998) designed a conceptual model depicting seven personal and seven organisational predefined values. These values are aligned and mapped in accordance with the outcomes generated from a standard questionnaire comprising 90-100 dimensions, each item correlating with one of the personal and/or organisational generic values. Through a gap analysis aligned and misaligned values are identified and action plans proposed.

Organisational culture literature shows that standardised questionnaires are traditionally designed from a menu of predefined cultural dimensions which are also used to define an organisations culture. This approach, according to Denison (1996), falls within the positivist paradigm of culture. Thus quantitative

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1 The terms 'depreciative' and 'deficit-based' are figural descriptions used to emphasize the inability of the problem solving mode of action research to challenge the guiding assumptions of culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, and to furnish new alternative for social action (Gergen, 1982). This is in line with the pattern of discourse reported in a case study by Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett (2001), and does not intend to undermine quantitative methodologies stemming from the positivist paradigm.

methodologies geared toward diagnosing organisational culture are usually prescribed. Questionnaires are generally administered in the form of ranking scales, the Likert scale being one of the most popular formats used (Smith & Roodt, 2003), which are completed individually by the employees. Having analysed 18 culture surveys, Ashkanasy et al. (2000) identified the ten most representative organisational culture dimensions, namely: *leadership*; *organisational structure*; *innovation*; *job performance*; *planning*; *communication*; *environment*; *humanistic workplace*; *development of the individual*; and socialisation on entry.

Given these generic dimensions, and having administered standardised questionnaires, an in-depth diagnostic report of an organisation's culture is extracted. The diagnosis, as per many (not all) quantitative instruments, is in the form of a gap analysis, serving as a catalyst for what Sorensen and Yaeger (2004) would call *discrepancy-based* change. Thus developmental areas or limiting factors within the organisation are exposed and diagnostic reports, with the aim of solving "what is *wrong* with the culture?" and/or "what does the present organisational culture do to *limit* what we can do or need to do" are compiled (Gidewell, 1986, p. 77). Embraced by many organisations, standardised questionnaires could lead to the initiation of significant measures aimed at correcting the social system or changing the organisation's culture (Barrett, 1998).

Standardised questionnaires designed for the purpose of diagnosing organisational cultural issues, have "plagued" the field of organisational development (OD) for many years. Harrison and Shirom (1999) noted that in using diagnostic tools, "investigators look for gaps between current and desired cultural states" (p. 278). However, imposing a generic and universal framework onto an organisation's social architecture typifies the traditional OD approach of problem diagnosis, gap analysis and feedback. Within this paradigm, the extent to which organisation and individual values are misaligned becomes the focus of the intervention.

Operating within a deficit-based paradigm is unlikely to yield a culturally inspired positive vision of the organisation's future, and problem solving is likely to overshadow the inherent potential of cultural capital to foster a competitive advantage. Furthermore a gap analysis does not produce much common ground between members of the organisation (Sorensen & Yaeger, 2004), and fails to capture the organisation's unique flavour and competitive edge.

As a result of a restrictive view toward organisational culture, as well as the inherent complexities and challenges associated with understanding the *mysterious and irrational* (Schein, 1985), management's perceived reluctance to solve or even attempt to leverage culture may seem rational. The challenge to solve the organisation's cultural issues is normally delegated to either the human resources department and/or that of an external consultant. However, the consultant's solutions are often rejected on the basis that the consultant is of *foreign tissue* and not part of the organisation (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000).

Since "organisational cultures are created by the leaders" (Schein, 1985, p. 2) and reflect the beliefs and values of the more influential organisational members (Ellson, 2004), management ought to take responsibility for the strategic implications of their organisation's culture (Harrison & Shirom, 1999). However, some business leaders are of the opinion that cultural issues and the organisation's competitive strategy are remotely, if at all, connected and view culture as a 'criticism of management's ability and personality', rather than a fundamental dimension of competitive advantage (Ellson, 2004). As a result, culture is framed in the negative while its potential to be leveraged and capitalised on remains unexplored.

It seems that what is called for is a more synthetic approach toward understanding and leveraging organisational cultural capital by inquiring into that what is positive and life-giving, as opposed to an analytic approach which, according to Hofstede (1991), frames culture as something the organisation *has*. Alternatively, should an organisation's culture be viewed as socially constructed by employees, culture would be then construed as something the organisation *is* and could therefore be viewed as a *gestalt* (larger than the whole). However, Hofstede noted that managers generally have difficulty in relating to fuzzy concepts like gestalts and instead focus on bottom-line figures.

From a social constructionist perspective, the use of standardised questionnaires in unearthing organisational cultural issues is challenged. Glidewell (1986) found that "culture evolves from human interaction" (p. 27), however, questionnaires are normally completed in isolation and away from the job, therefore they treat people as separate from the social context in which they act (Harrison & Shirom, 1999). This eliminates the opportunity to understand the terms, concepts, and frames that participant's use when they describe the organisation in their own words (Harrison & Shirom, 1999). Social constructionists frame organisational culture as socially constructed through routine conversations, storytelling, and interpretations of meanings and symbols. Because corporate stories reveal the organisation's culture (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000), Harrison and Shirom are of the opinion that "many important cultural elements are hard to discern and measure, and are therefore not amendable to questionnaire study" (p. 264). This reinforces Schein's (1985) view that one can hardly use a questionnaire to measure corporate culture, which is in line with Rosenhead and Mingers' (2001) opinion that, because organisations operate within an environment of complexity and uncertainty, making sense of an organisation's culture by imposing standardised questionnaires onto its social architecture is questionable. However, Reichers and Schneider (1990) are of the opinion that questionnaires can play a fundamental role in terms of understanding, diagnosing and measuring culture.

It seems that in practice organisational culture analysis tends to be viewed predominantly from the negative with an emphasis on problem solving. In managing organisational culture, Hofstede (1991) suggested that "diagnosis and choosing the right therapy is indispensable," (p. 200). However, if organisational culture is a potential source of competitive advantage (Ellson, 2004), then Schein's (1985) view, that organisations should consider developing strategies to enhance their current culture, calls for immediate action. This implies leveraging and enhancing the organisation's positive cultural dimensions could yield far greater returns other than framing culture in the negative as a problem to be solved. The search should therefore be for a healthier, more constructive and synthetic approach toward leveraging an organisation's cultural capital. To understand culture in organisations, new methods and approaches should be explored (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

Since it is through language that "the existential underbelly of organisations" (assumptions, values and beliefs) are exposed (Glidewell, 1986, p. 29), it appears that a deliberate exploration of an organisation's cultural capital should be based on the narrative level, that is, stemming from dialogue, conversations and storytelling. Furthermore, since culture evolves over time, Schein (1985) suggested that historical data holds the key to unearthing unique organisational dimensions. Thus in pursuit of discovering and leveraging organisational cultural capital, an appreciation of the organisation's past, as opposed to analysis and clinical diagnosis, is more likely to lead to discovery.

An appreciative paradigm encourages a fundamentally different approach from the traditional analytical procedures equated with cultural diagnosis. The aim of this study is to propose a more positive approach to leveraging an organisation's cultural capital. Appreciative Inquiry (AI), as a process and methodology, is proposed as an alternative approach from which to reframe culture in the positive in order to unearth an organisation's unique strengths as manifested in the form of cultural capital.

As a participative form of action research, AI invites broad collaboration in an attempt to create a shared sense of meaning by establishing common ground between all levels of staff. As a natural outcome of inquiring into past peak experiences and future visioning, common ground is seen as an enabling factor in effective organisational change (Sorensen & Yaeger, 2004), and is synonymous with discovering a shared set of values, which comprises the soul of the organisation's culture (Glidewell, 1986). AI offers the opportunity to move from cultural diagnosis to what Schein (1985) would call the intimate discovery of cultural strengths. Gergen (1999) emphasised the need for organisations to generate change from within, that is, through inside action. Thus the call for continuous organisational learning and discovery through action research is proposed as an alternative from a blueprint or universal model toward organisational cultural diagnosis.

Appreciative Inquiry
Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is the study of what works well, and can be defined as "the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2003, p. 173). AI is a highly participative process and a form of action research focusing on the exploration of an organisation's life-giving forces (positive core) when functioning at its very best.

In 1980, David Cooperrider, a doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University, Ohio, was a member of the Cleveland Clinic Project research team. Their task was to diagnose and analyse what was wrong with the human side of the clinic. However, during his research Cooperrider identified a range of positive factors and forces that fostered a culture of cooperation, innovation and egalitarian governance within the clinic. Cooperrider's advisor, Suresh Srivastva, suggested that he focus on the discovery of those factors contributing to the highly effective functioning of the clinic, and make that the foundation of his research. The idea was approved by the clinic's chairman, resulting in the first major large-scale AI intervention with profound results (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

Cooperrider's doctoral dissertation titled "Appreciative Inquiry: Toward a Methodology for Understanding and Enhancing Organisational Innovation," was completed in 1986. In 1987, Cooperrider and Srivastva used the term Appreciative Inquiry for the first time in a professional publication: "Appreciative Inquiry in Organisational Life" (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

Assumptions
According to Magruder Watkins and Mohr (2001), the philosophy of AI is based on the following assumptions:
1. More effective organisations can be created by focusing more on their life-giving forces – organisations move toward what they study.
2. It is easier to create change by amplifying the positive qualities of an organisation than by trying to fix the negative qualities.
3. Allowing people to inquire together into the best examples of what they want more of creates its own momentum toward creating a more positive organisation.
4. Questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational.

Theoretical foundations
AI emerged as a theory-building process used primarily by academics, and not as an approach to organisational change. Nevertheless in 1987, Cooperrider and Srivastva discovered AI's potential as a full-blown intervention framework in addition to its theory-building origins (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001). However, theory-building remains at the core of AI and is in line with Lewin's (1951) proposal that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory," (p. 169). In this light, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) concurred that the theoretical contributions of science may generate significant and profound insight in terms of contributing to change and development in organisations. Magruder Watkins and Mohr (2001) provided the following theoretical foundations of AI:

- *Social constructionism*: which implies that meaning is generated through language, and it is through language and shared meaning that reality is created.
- *The power of image*: which asserts that an organisation will show a heliotropic tendency to move toward positive images.

Stemming from AI's theoretical origins and grounded in scientific research, the following eight principles emerged as the foundation of AI's theory-based approach to change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003):
- *The constructionist principle*
  Words create worlds. Through language and conversations, reality is co-created. "Constructionism is an approach to human science and practice which replaces the individual with the relationship as the locus of knowledge, and thus is built around a keen appreciation of the power of language and discourse of all types" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2003, p. 176).
- *The principle of simultaneity*
  Inquiry and change are simultaneous events. Discoveries are made by asking questions that invite storytelling and the sharing of peak experiences from which a desired future is envisioned and socially created.
- *The poetic principle*
  Unlike a machine, an organisation is considered an open book of which its story is constantly being co-authored. Furthermore, like a well-written piece of poetry, an organisation is open to endless interpretation.
- *The anticipatory principle*
  A positive image inspires positive action. A workforce's collective imagination of a desired future is a positive source of energy and motivation behind everyday actions. Cooperrider and Whitney (2003) stated that the artful creation of positive imagery on a collective basis might be the most prolific thing any inquiry could do.
- *The positive principle*
  Building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive effect and social bonding. The more positively the questions are framed, the longer lasting and successful the change effort (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2003).
- *The wholeness principle*
  Wholeness brings out the best in people, relationships, communities, and organisations, while inviting people to focus on higher ground. Wholeness fosters the understanding and acceptance of individual differences.
- *The enactment principle*
  Be the change you want to see. This principle suggests that positive change is realised as images and visions of a desired future are enacted in the present.
- *The free choice principle*
  Free choice is an essential element of being human while fostering performance. Thriving organisations are characterised by employees who are free to choose their terms of contribution, which in return generate enthusiasm and commitment.

Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2003) provide a systematic and practical process aimed at operationalising the above principles, namely the 4-D Cycle. The 4-D Cycle is a flexible tool that guides the organisation toward discovering its positive core in mobilising the workforce toward achieving a common goal.
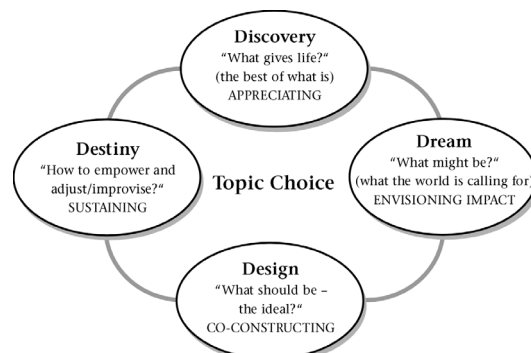

Figure 2: The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. 5

A brief outline and summary of each phase of the 4-D Cycle is presented below (Magruder Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Cooperrider et al., 2003).

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF PHASES IN THE 4-D CYCLE

Phase	Brief Outline
1. Topic choice	• Human systems grow in the direction of what they choose to study • The AI interview questions are framed around topics people want to see grow and flourish in their organisations • The questions are unconditionally positive • The participation and data collection strategies are decided upon • The project management structure is developed
2. Discovery	• The AI interviews are conducted to identify the life-giving forces at the core of the organisation • These life-giving forces and structures that are present when the organisation is functioning at its best, begin to surface through storytelling and the sharing of peak experiences, values, and wishes for the organisation • Hope grows and organisational capacity is enriched
3. Dream	• Practical – through storytelling, participants create a shared and desired image of their future that is grounded in the organisation's positive past • Generative – the mind naturally begins to wonder and envisions new possibilities by amplifying the organisation's positive core
4. Design	• The organisation's social architecture, wherein the exceptional becomes everyday and ordinary, is crafted in the form of an inspirational statement or a provocative proposition wherein the organisation's cultural capital is reflected • This phase requires in-depth dialogue about the best structure and processes to support the new system
5. Destiny	• Through continuous learning, innovation and creativity, the organisation evolves to enhance and sustain its positive core (cultural capital) by breathing life into its provocative proposition • Changes never thought possible are democratically mobilised as individuals and business units commit to a course of positive action

Leveraging organisational cultural capital
In moving from the systematic diagnosis of cultural issues to the joint discovery of organisational cultural capital, it seems that an appreciative approach is likely to generate more enthusiasm and excitement toward a common goal than a gap analysis would be able to accomplish. Figure 3 compares a traditional diagnostic approach to analysing organisational culture (left column) to an appreciative approach toward leveraging organisational cultural capital (right column). Because the outcomes generated within the traditional paradigm relate to a set of predetermined, generic and universal cultural dimensions, it is argued that a diagnostic approach is unlikely to lead to the discovery of an organisation's unique values, namely its cultural capital.
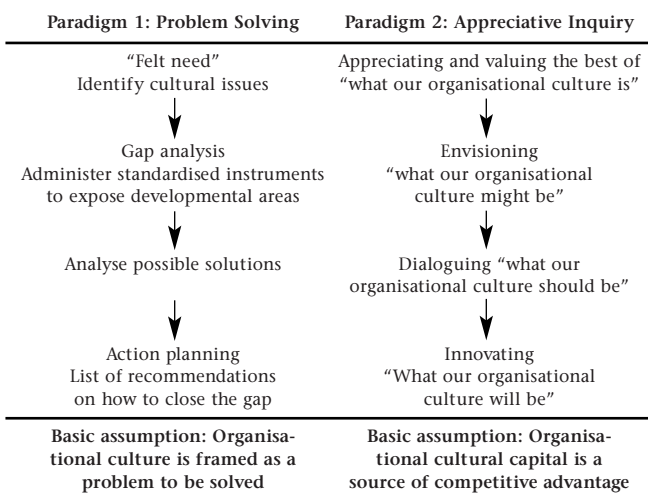
Paradigm 1: Problem Solving	Paradigm 2: Appreciative Inquiry
"Felt need" Identify cultural issues	Appreciating and valuing the best of "what our organisational culture is"
↓	↓
Gap analysis Administer standardised instruments to expose developmental areas	Envisioning "what our organisational culture might be"
↓	↓
Analyse possible solutions	Dialoguing "what our organisational culture should be"
↓	↓
Action planning List of recommendations on how to close the gap	Innovating "What our organisational culture will be"
Basic assumption: Organisational culture is framed as a problem to be solved	Basic assumption: Organisational cultural capital is a source of competitive advantage

Figure 3: Adapted from Cooperrider and Whitney (2000, p. 23)

To discover cultural capital through an AI intervention is to expose the organisation's positive culture core, serving as a source of energy and a catalyst for further action. In pursuit of discovering an organisation's cultural capital, a case study was conducted whereby the underlying principles of AI were operationalised through the 4-D Cycle.

METHOD

A descriptive case study
Appreciative Inquiry as a form of participative action research is uniquely oriented toward the creation of productive outcomes (Sorensen & Yaeger, 2004), as reported by Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett (2001). Action research is a democratic and data-driven form of inquiry (Sorensen & Yaeger, 2004), and because of the systematic nature of the 4-D Cycle, the descriptive case study method, as described by Yin (2003), was selected.

In 2004, an e-learning company (unit of analysis) based in Johannesburg, South Africa, embarked on an appreciative journey toward discovery, dream, design, and destiny (phases of the 4-D Cycle). Initially, ten of the organisation's managers were invited to attend an introductory workshop on AI. The workshop was facilitated by an Industrial Psychologist, who is also a certified AI practitioner. The purpose of the workshop was to discuss the potential benefits to the organisation in using AI as a method to leverage cultural capital, and to explore the opportunity of initiating a system-wide AI intervention. The workshop commenced with a 30-minute interview experience between pairs (five pairs in total). Each participant had 15 minutes to interview his or her partner using the standard AI interview protocol (Cooperrider et al., 2003):
1. Describe a high point experience in your organisation, a time when you felt most alive and engaged.
2. Without being modest, what is it that you value most about yourself, your work, and your organisation?
3. What are the core factors that give life to your organisation, without which the organisation would cease to exist?
4. What three wishes do you have now to enhance the health and vitality of your organisation?

Having experienced the power of asking the unconditional positive question, a small discussion followed after which the group unanimously embraced the idea of a system-wide Appreciative Inquiry and an agreement was made to involve the whole organisation. In consultation with a director, it was decided to schedule three workshops based on the 4-D Cycle to allow for maximum participation (N = 70) while not disrupting the flow of business. The three workshops took place on Friday afternoons and stretched over a five-week period. In order to sustain momentum, interest and enthusiasm amongst participants, the intranet, internal newsletters and e-mail were used as communication media to routinely inform, remind and create an awareness of the intervention throughout the organisation. Moreover, ongoing face-to-face contact sessions were initiated on a daily basis. The contact sessions created a forum from which to debrief employees in terms of the interventions progress, and the anticipated way forward beyond the three workshops.

Each of the three workshops, having served as a data collection forum, was attended by more than 50% (n>35) of the workforce from which a range of positive outcomes emerged. Based on the topic: leveraging organisational cultural capital, a concise sum-mary of the phases of the 4-D Cycle in action is presented below:

TABLE 2
THE 4-D CYCLE: IMPLEMENTATION AND PROCESS

Phase	Process
(Pre-selected) topic choice	*Leveraging organisational cultural capital*
Discovery – *Workshop one*	Presentation: • AI overview and brief introduction to action research • Topic: leveraging organisational cultural capital in relation to the 4-D Cycle Brainstorming: • "What do you think is this organisation's positive core?" • AI – an alternative approach (from problem solving) to discovering the organisation's positive core One-on-one interviews: • Participants debriefed and invited to attend the second workshop • Their thoughts on the AI interview protocol? Data capturing: • Interview guides collected and stored by the researcher for further content analysis
Discovery (cont.) and dream – *Workshop two*	Overview (4-D Cycle and topic choice) Storytelling and theme analysis: • Participants share peak experience stories in smaller groups and identify underlying themes Feedback: • Sub-groups share selected stories and emerging themes with larger group Discovering cultural capital: • Participants prioritize the most important themes (cultural capital) Images of the future: • Leveraging organisational cultural capital; "what could be"; images shared Painting exercise: • Creating a common vision for the future through art • Explanations of each artwork Homework: • how business units could leverage cultural capital
Design	Overview (4-D Cycle, topic choice, cultural capital) Facilitated group process to co-construct the organisation's social architecture: • Definition and guidelines on writing a provocative proposition • Individual provocative proposition's integrated Discussion: • Operationalising the provocative proposition • "Selling" the provocative proposition to the organisation
Destiny – *Workshop three*	Overview (4-D Cycle, topic choice, cultural capital, selected outcomes) Provocative proposition shared with the group Small group discussions: • How to leverage the organisation's cultural capital embedded within the provocative proposition Business units share commitments with the larger group

The following products resulted from the AI process.

For the purpose of this case study, the *topic choice leveraging organisational cultural capital* was pre-selected. As the group assembled in the training room for the first workshop (*discovery phase*), there was a general mood of uncertainty, a sense of nervous energy and hesitation as participants positioned themselves around the room's parameter. After a brief introduction to AI, the participants were asked to form pairs, the appreciative interview guides were distributed, and the interviewing began. The following interview protocol, adapted from the encyclopaedia of positive questions (Whitney, Cooperrider & Trosten-Bloom, 2002), was designed as the data collection instrument for this study:

1. What first attracted you to the organisation and its people? What excited you about the organisation?
2. When you think back to your beginnings with the organisation, what were your most positive and powerful first impressions?
3. What are the core factors that give life to the organisation, without which the organisation would not exist?
4. What are the unique aspects of the organisation's culture that positively affect the spirit, vitality, and effectiveness of the organisation?

5. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself, your work, and the organisation?
6. When you reflect on your time with the organisation, what is the greatest contribution it has made to you and your life?
7. Tell me about a high point experience when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about working at this organisation? What was happening? What were you feeling? What made it a great moment? What were others doing that made it a great moment for you? What did you do to contribute to creating this moment? What organisational forces contributed to this peak experience?
8. Imagine all organisations were animals. Which animal would you like this organisation to be represented as and why? What is it about this animal you value? Tell me about a time when you saw this/these value(s) alive in this organisation.
9. When you think of organisations that you consider the best employers in your community or profession, what is it about their culture that makes them attractive to you? How might we create more of that quality within our own culture?
10. Imagine that you have awakened from a long sleep. You get up to realise that everything in the organisation is as you always dreamed it would be. Your ideal state has become a reality. What do you see? What is going on? How have things changed? What are people talking about? What culture is emerging through language, stories and conversations?
11. If this organisation's culture were to be a strategic advantage, what would you like to see done differently? What are your three wishes for this organisation? What is this organisation all about?

For the first time in the organisation's history, the workforce was invited to discover, articulate and leverage those factors that give life to the organisation, namely their cultural capital. Before long, the room was filled with a multitude of conversations and laughter. An explosion of positive peak experience stories was shared from which unique organisational cultural dimensions emerged. Herewith three abbreviated versions of peak experience stories that were shared on this day:

> When 'X' started at the company, she was thrown into the deep end. It was also an extremely busy period for everyone. Despite all this, colleagues gave up their time to teach her the ropes, and show her what was expected. This was a peak experience for 'X', that is the camaraderie, team spirit, and willingness for people to go out of their way to help her.

> 'Y' has experienced many occasions when she was asked to undertake a task or project on her own accord. The responsibility and trust, reinforced by an open management style, which was handed to her, was a peak experience. From these experiences, 'Y' has developed and grown personally and professionally.

> Before I began my career at this organisation, I came from a traditional hierarchical company. Looking back at my experience, I can see how this company is growing in terms of structure, systems, and professionalism. The people are young and dynamic and make things happen. If this trend continues, the company will go places.

Having discovered and articulated 58 cultural dimensions from numerous past peak experience stories (i.e. the result of analysing the data generated through storytelling), each participant was then handed six yellow-dot stickers which were used to tag those themes considered as fundamental to the organisation's positive culture core. As a result of this democratic process, the following dimensions – representing the organisation's cultural capital – emerged: *a culture of humanity and teamwork*; *continuous flow of communication*; *continuous learning*; *creative freedom*; *open style of management*; *developing people through trust* and *staff support*. Thereafter, a thorough content analysis of the completed interview guides isolated the following selected quotes in support of the above themes:

Theme one: A culture of humanity and teamwork
"We are innovative, creative, hard working people who work as a team."

"... the first semester intake was a high point. Everyone was working together as a team. The hectic pace and vibe made it exciting."

Theme two: Continuous flow of communication
"A peak experience for me was the monthly staff meetings the company used to have. Although a newsletter and the intranet have now taken its place, I enjoyed the personal experience and richness of information that was coming straight from the director. Being kept in the loop was a high point for me."

"Internal communication is brilliant."

Theme three: Continuous learning
"I was given the opportunity to exploit my ability in designing the 'X' programme. This also gave me insight into a different field. I was excited as it was something new, a learning curve that had to be, and was conquered."

"I understand more about my career and have been able to improve my computer skills."

Theme four: Creative freedom
"When I was running the 'X' department, I was able to use all my abilities to make the department work. I felt I was given the opportunity to help myself, and the freedom to run the department with available resources."

"We have the freedom to create systems that aid in the process of improvement."

Theme five: Open style of management
"The work taught me independence; to take responsibility for my decisions; and broadened my knowledge base."

"...a pleasurable environment to work in."

Theme six: Developing people through trust
"I was surprised at the amount of development I could do in such a short space of time. Others were supportive, gave me positive feedback, trusted me, and relied on my decisions – which made me aware of my abilities. I worked very hard. I immersed myself in the job. Others involved were not experienced in development, so I inspired them to believe in themselves."

"... I felt trusted to get on with my job."

Theme seven: Staff support
"A high point for me was when I started a project which worked! I had to market and educate people on the programme ... I was excited. I received a lot of support and encouragement. I worked hard on the programme, and it was a big success."

"... colleagues working together 24 hour shifts and still ready to take on more ... I see a lot of support between colleagues in their sections."

Cued by asking the unconditional positive question, the second workshop provided the platform for creative and constructive dialogue, which was used to describe the group's hopes and wishes for the organisation's future. Grounded in their best past experiences and their desires for the future, these inspiring visions, once shared, became the collective property of the group and thus the organisation's common vision. The larger group was divided into four smaller groups and engaged in a painting exercise where their images of the organisation's future were re-created and presented in the form of art. During the *dream phase*, four pieces of art were jointly created which, as one participant boldly remarked, "shamelessly express what our organisation is all about". The positive effect this exercise had on the group was evident in that everyone (including a director) was involved and contributed to the creation of the artwork, which could be described as the unique and shared property of the group. The exercise undoubtedly forged a sense of unity between participants and departments as everyone embraced the task of visually enhancing the organisation's culture based on the positive.

The *design phase* resulted in the creation of a provocative proposition. A provocative proposition is a statement that bridges the best of 'what is' with what 'might be' (Ludema et al., 2001). Grounded in the organisation's past successes and crafted by eight employees, the organisation's provocative proposition read:

> We are young, hip, and fresh. Through the fostering and nurturing of strategic values, we are a formidable force. Our management and staff believe in creating a *culture of continuous learning* and *development through trust*. This culture allows for the *creative freedom* to achieve long-term goals. Our cornerstone is progress through *communication*, providing a *humanistic environment* by communicating through *teamwork*.

During the *destiny phase* participants were requested to assemble into their respective business units (seven in total) and brainstorm ideas on how to operationalise the organisation's provocative proposition and thus co-create their future through innovation and action. This exercise fostered the 'coming together' of participants to accumulate a melting pot of unique and diverse ideas. Thereafter, a representative from each business unit was asked to share with the larger group their commitment(s) toward leveraging the organisation's cultural capital. All responses were transcribed. Herewith three such commitments:

Business unit – Development: We are committed to sharing technology and ideas to improve work performance in each department. From the company, we request you to share with us those areas with which you are struggling. Maybe we could help in terms of available technology that no one in the company, besides the development team, is aware of. We will also place a suggestion box on the intranet.

Business unit – Credits: We will strive to deliver better feedback to our call centre. We will also contact our affiliated academic institutions to explore ways to improve their response time to our questions, so we can deliver a better client service.

Business unit – Call centre: We request help from the development department to improve our client services. We will show our clients and potential clients that we are the e-learning guru's.

When the workshop was over, the facilitator asked the group what they valued about their AI experience. The following response in itself is profound in that it highlights the collaborative and participative nature of AI: "For the first time we have had the opportunity to communicate with each department face-to-face," said one participant. It was evident that those involved experienced a sense of unity between departments as new relationships were formed.

Beyond the intervention
As a result of the AI intervention, 12 highly committed and dedicated employees volunteered to form part of a support team in pursuit of leveraging the organisation's cultural capital. As a result of their eagerness to unleash positive change within the organisation, seven action teams were formed. Additional themes, namely: recognition and appreciation; unselfishly helping others; and pride were articulated after a content analysis of the interview guides was completed. The team leaders for each of the seven action teams were self-selected. The purpose of each action team was firstly to serve as a catalyst for positive change within the organisation; secondly to generate enthusiasm and excitement within the business units by promoting and implementing innovative initiatives aimed at leveraging specific topics; and thirdly to recruit employees to join the action teams through continuous communication and networking.

As a result of the support team's efforts, a range of new initiatives (table 3) were discussed, approved by management and implemented by the seven action teams.

TABLE 3
BEYOND THE INTERVENTION: SELECTED INITIATIVES

Legend	Status 1 2 3		
1 = *Discussed* (the initiative has been discussed within the support team)	✓		
2 = *Approved* (management has agreed on the implementation of the initiative)	✓	✓	
3 = *The initiative has been implemented*	✓	✓	✓

Initiatives	Status 1 2 3		
• Client survey based on positively framed questions	✓	✓	✓
• Call center intervention based on the 4-D Cycle Topic: *We want a smoother running and happier call center*	✓	✓	✓
• Training team workshop to establish a group identity and overall purpose (Positive image, positive action)	✓	✓	✓
• The directors edition newsletter	✓	✓	✓
• Employee success stories published	✓	✓	✓
• Positive feedback survey leading to the identification of best practices	✓	✓	
• Appreciative interview guide for recruitment and selection	✓		
• New employee induction program	✓		
• Charity box for abandoned children	✓	✓	✓
• Photos plus an introduction to all personnel published on the intranet	✓		
• Values-based recognition programme	✓	✓	
• The Young, Hip, and Fresh art festival	✓	✓	
• Guest book at reception	✓		
• Teambuilding activity (ten-pin bowling)	✓	✓	
• Online discussion forum	✓	✓	✓
• Editorial team to set-up the Young, Hip and Fresh E-Mag	✓		
• Coffee table information pack	✓		
• Past, present and future coffee room	✓		
• Events calendar	✓		
• Monthly staff meetings re-introduced	✓	✓	✓

DISCUSSION

In the quest for an alternative approach to discovering an organisation's cultural capital, AI was selected as a process and methodology to move beyond the status quo in an attempt to challenge the perception of culture as 'a problem to be solved' (figure 3). By means of a descriptive case study based on the 4-D Cycle, it was shown how an organisation's cultural capital could be jointly discovered and leveraged.

TABLE 4
A COMPARISON OF STANDARDISED CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

The 10 most representative cultural dimensions according to Ashkanasy et al. (2000)	An organisation's cultural capital discovered through AI
1. Humanistic workplace	→ A culture of humanity and teamwork
2. Communication	→ Continuous flow of communication
3. Innovation	→ Creative freedom
4. Leadership	→ Open style of management
5. Development of the individual	→ Developing people through trust
6. Socialisation on entry	→ Staff support
7. Organisational structure	Recognition and appreciation
8. Job performance	Unselfishly helping others
9. Planning	Continuous learning
10. Environment	Pride

It was confirmed through this study that AI moves beyond the analysis and measurement of generic and universal cultural

dimensions, adding value in terms of facilitating the discovery of an organisation's cultural capital which a gap analysis fails to achieve. The matching or overlapping of dimensions 1-6 above seems to indicate that the AI methodology underlying these discoveries not only confirms the generalisability of certain cultural dimensions (Ashkanasy et al., 2000), but exposes the inability of a diagnostic approach to extract organisation-specific and unique cultural dimensions. Should a diagnostic intervention have been adapted for the purpose of this study, it is unlikely that organisation-specific dimensions of *recognition and appreciation, unselfishly helping others*, and *pride* would have been unmasked, as they are omitted from the traditional menu of cultural dimensions from which a questionnaire in all probability would have been designed. In addition, because the process of discovering the organisation's cultural capital was through a democratic and collaborative AI intervention, a provocative proposition which served as a catalyst for further action was crafted. Whether or not further action would result in a competitive advantage calls for longitudinal research and therefore extends beyond the scope of this study.

However, this study suggests that an AI approach to leveraging organisational cultural capital could add value in terms of the potential to deliver a competitive advantage, and in this regard supports Barrett's (1998) view that cultural capital could significantly impact an organisation's market value. As participants became aware of how to source cultural capital and having experienced it on a visceral level, one could feel the rising energy as increased participation, meaningful interaction and a higher level of co-operation transcended superficial relations. This is in line with Barrett's definition of organisational cultural capital which emphasises the importance of valuing the relational aspect of human interaction. As networks grew and relationships strengthened, interdepartmental unity emerged and commitments to streamline business processes were made. Through this 'coming together' of departments, a sense of wholeness (gestalt) was formed (Hofstede, 1991), while new levels of trust were established as tacit knowledge was shared. Tacit knowledge is stored in culture (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000) and given the social orientation of AI, it is through networking where learning the ropes occurs. Therefore, through networking tacit knowledge is developed. As a result of this study, networking (a dimension of social capital) emerged as one of the goals of the seven action teams within the organisation.

In pursuit of leveraging an organisation's cultural capital, this study provides traces of evidence that an AI approach has the potential to enhance an organisation's human, social, and psychological capital (Luthans & Youssef, 2004), as reflected in figure 4 below. This indicates that the discovery of cultural capital could yield far greater returns over and above leveraging the organisation's inner strengths, if an appreciative methodology is adopted.
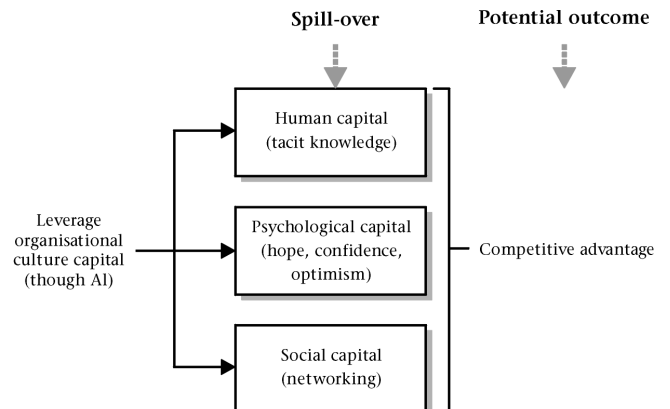

Figure 4: The spill-over effect and the potential impact of leveraging organisational cultural capital through AI

AI is based on that which is positive and life-giving, and it is through collaboration that common ground is found. As a point of departure, AI is fundamentally different from traditional OD processes, in that individual roles and status are suspended in pursuit of wholeness, and relations are strengthened as a shared vision emerges. What became evident in this case study was that management's participation and support, or lack thereof, has a profound impact in terms of the intervention's sustainability. Moreover, an absence of managerial participation and support influences levels of trust between ranks, which could lead to the intervention been interpreted by employees as yet another management scheme. The challenge to genuinely suspend one's role and status in the organisational hierarchy may be an impenetrable request, which could ultimately sacrifice the creation of positive outcomes (Sorensen & Yaeger, 2004).

Given a second opportunity to perform the study, the philosophy of AI would be introduced more subtly with a stronger focus on the positive topic choice, namely leveraging organisational cultural capital. AI is likely to be a foreign concept to management and differs fundamentally from traditional problem solving. In this sense, the approach could threaten the *status quo* as maximum collaboration is implied.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that it is possible to consciously leverage organisational cultural capital through a collaborative inquiry without having to focus on problem solving and gap analysis. AI, as a philosophy and a process can *create common ground* as organisational cultural capital is democratically sourced through a system-wide inquiry; *unmask organisation-specific and unique cultural dimensions* thus serving as a foundation for a competitive advantage; and *generate further action* as organisational culture is recognised as a resource to be capitalised on. The fact that 20 new initiatives were 'brought to the table' in a relatively short period of time confirms that an AI process can rejuvenate the spirit of an organisation.

The process has shown how culture manifests through storytelling and conversations (narrative), and as such is a social construction of an organisation where through language and shared meaning cultural capital is sourced and reality co-created. It was re-affirmed that an appreciative approach is fundamentally different from that of traditional problem solving. AI transcends deficit-based inquiry by focusing on that which is positive and life-giving.

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