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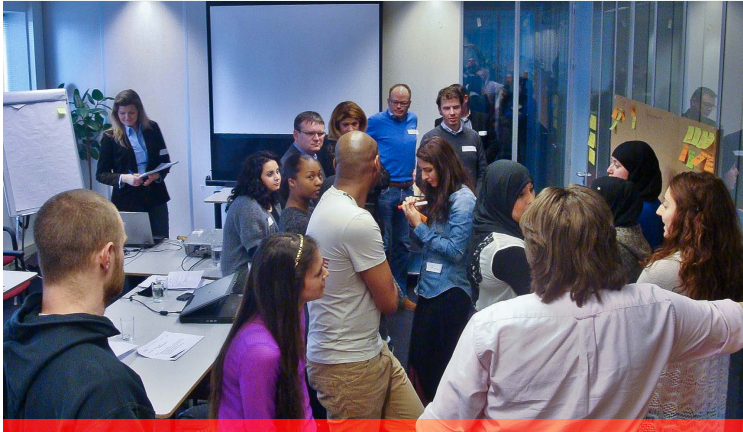
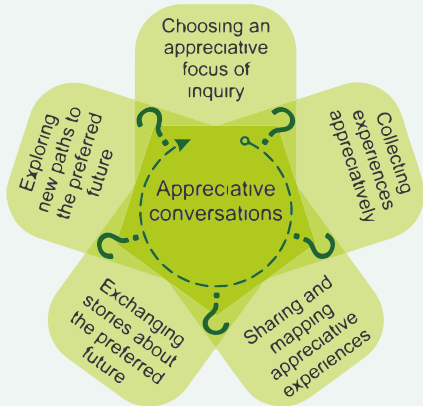
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# AI Practitioner



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## Appreciative & Strengths-based Lean Thinking

## Positive Engagement with Business Improvement and Efficiency

Edited by

**David Shaked and Nicolas Stampf**

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## Appreciative & Strengths-based Lean Thinking: Positive Engagement with Business Improvement and Efficiency

Inside this issue

### Welcome to November 2015 issue of AI Practitioner

This issue details what makes process improvement engaging and resourceful, and creates something new that is better and more powerful than simply adding the two fields together.

In “Sustainable OD as an Issue Centric Approach”, Danielle P. Zandee sets out four premises of sustainable OD.

In Research Review & Notes, Jannie Pretorius from South Africa shows how

studying the positive core of exceptional individuals has been applied in higher education, while AI Resources focuses on ways AI can help evolve the use of Lean Thinking in businesses and organisations.

From 2016, *AI Practitioner* will be published by the Instituut voor Interventiekunde (Institute for Intervention Studies, [www.instituutvoorinterventiekunde.nl](http://www.instituutvoorinterventiekunde.nl)) in Amsterdam, a school of Appreciative

Interventionism and place to become an AI practitioner, master practitioner or meta practitioner. Founded by Wick van der Vaart, it has many ideas for developing *AI Practitioner* and I wish them all success. Very many thanks to everyone who helped me develop a simple email newsletter into the current international journal.

**Anne Radford**  
Editor, *AI Practitioner*

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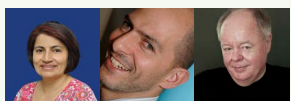


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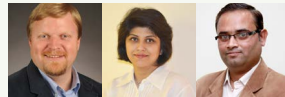


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# Appreciative & Strengths-based Lean Thinking: Positive Engagement with Business Improvement and Efficiency

Lean Thinking emphasises the importance of value, flow and continuous improvement. It is based on an assumption that there is a theoretical 'perfect state' for each organisational process and that the current state deviates from the perfect state due to inefficiencies and waste. Strengths-based Lean Thinking shifts the focus to co-constructing a vision that is based on our positive-core, and can make process improvement engaging, creative and resourceful, – because it works with what gives life: to people, to organisations and to their processes.

## What is Lean Thinking?

When we think of organisational processes as “lean”, we mean that all our resources are used to deliver value to the end customers (as the organisation defines it) and nothing else. This value has to “flow” through the value chain of activities without interruption: all activities that are not directly supporting the creation and delivery of value should be considered as waste, and therefore reviewed for potential elimination. In other words, Lean is focused on getting the right things to the right place at the right time in the right quantity, while achieving perfect work flow which is dictated by customers’ “pull” of these goods or services, all while respecting everyone in the organisation. All of this has to be done while minimising waste, and staying flexible and able to respond to change. Lean Thinking originated on the manufacturing floor and in the supply chain, but over the past ten years or so it has expanded to services and internal support processes in organisations. We can now see Lean implementation in hospitals, call centres and banks amongst many other service organisations. Today Lean Thinking is certainly the most popular approach to efficiency improvement.

Lean Thinking has a set of principles which emphasise the importance of value, flow and continuous improvement. Many tools and processes are commonly used when practising Lean; they help bring the principles and this unique way of thinking into everyday activities.

The original thinking and many of the principles behind Lean Thinking have a positive focus. However, most applications of Lean Thinking follow the classic deficit-focused approach to problem-solving: understanding existing efficiency problems in detail, finding root causes for the “gaps” and fixing them. It is based on an assumption that

Co-constructing a vision that is based on our positive-core goes a long way towards thriving at work.

there is a theoretical “perfect state” for each organisational process and that the current state deviates from the perfect state due to inefficiencies and waste.

**Commonly used tools in the Lean Thinking tool box:**

**5S:** Five workplace practices that begin with S in Japanese (and in their common English translations). They are: Sort; Set in order; Shine; Standardise; and Sustain. The purpose of 5S is to optimise the workplace in a way that makes it easier to perform all tasks in the future. It also enables “visual management” – an important Lean idea.

**Seven Wastes:** Waste is any activity that consumes resources but creates no value for the customer. The seven categories of waste are: 1) Defects; 2) Overproduction; 3) Unnecessary transportation; 4) Waiting; 5) Inventory; 6) Unnecessary motion; and 7) Over-processing. By identifying and eliminating these we provide greater value to customers.

**Kaizen event:** A concentrated, highly intensive activity designed to make improvements rapidly. It typically takes between one and five days and involves a cross-functional team.

Looking at every process as a problem to be solved together with relentless pressure to “remove waste” and deliver economic results comes at a cost: it is not uncommon to witness engagement levels drop during a Lean turn-over and for scepticism to develop. Even successful attempts at improving efficiency become difficult to sustain.

So what does this have to do with strengths-based change, like Appreciative Inquiry? As AI practitioners, we know that what we focus our attention on grows, and that therefore our choice of questions is fateful.

If we go searching for problems, experience shows us how quickly people can fall back to frustration, finger-pointing and blaming each other. Blaming the problem on the way a process was designed instead of on people can divert that negative response (we’ve both used that trick more than once) but, for most people, it’s far from satisfying or engaging. Discovering “the best of what is”, co-constructing a vision that is based on our positive-core, designing ways to reach it and implementing ideas that generate the most energy goes a long way towards thriving at work.

An appreciative and strengths-based approach to Lean Thinking can make process improvement engaging, creative and resourceful – because it works with what gives life: to people, to organisations and to their processes! Appreciative Inquiry uncovers successful past experiences, amplifies them and enables them to be replicated or built upon. It also creates a shared vision of where everyone in the organisation (collectively) wants to go as well as ideas of how to get there.



We have seen a rapid adoption and expansion of the strengths-based approach to Lean Thinking around the world.

For several years, we have been taking this different approach and have been exploring the question: “Can Lean practice and thinking be merged with Appreciative Inquiry principles, thinking and practice, with its clear strengths-focused approach to ‘problem solving’”? Our experience has shown us that it certainly can and that in doing so, our results exceed expectations, and motivation for improvement is increased.

We have both been writing and sharing our ideas at a dedicated LinkedIn group.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, Nicolas wrote an article about the combination of Solution Focus and Lean and David has published a book combining strengths-based approaches with Lean Six Sigma which was published in November 2013. Since then we have seen a rapid adoption and expansion of the strengths-based approach to Lean Thinking around the world. We felt that now is the time to highlight a small number of these great developments.

### About this issue

When we wrote the call for articles for this edition more than a year ago, we didn't know how many articles or proposals we might receive: the practice was making baby-steps around the world at that stage. We were surprised and delighted to see so many proposals and great stories coming back. In fact, we did not have enough space in this edition to include all of them.

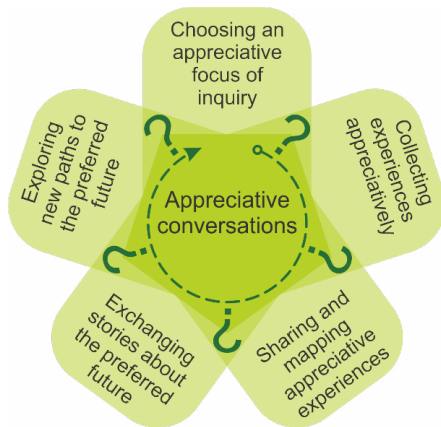
This issue of AIP is about showing different ways of combining the best of these two seemingly (though only apparently) different worlds: the classic, deficit-based, approach to Lean Thinking, and the strengths-based world. The challenge can also be seen in combining other, seemingly diametrically opposed dimensions: that of often-rigid, if not dry, analysis of process defects, with the more caring, soft dialogues and co-creations fostered by the strengths-based approaches to change.

We hope that the following articles show that these two apparently paradoxically (up until now) different worlds complement each other well, and in many cases bring more than the simple combination would have led us to expect.

We begin this edition with a client interview. Lorna Stelakis, the operations director of a leading fashion brand in the UK, has been working with both classic Lean and Strengths-based Lean over a period of several years. The interview with her highlights what she has learned and experienced from switching to a strengths-based approach and the positive impact it has had on her organisation, her team and herself.

Jacqueline Bustos Coral, Juan Pablo Ortiz Jiménez and Kaj Voetmann write about ideas for approaches to AI Lean for team leaders, starting with some simple suggestions. Their article contains several practical examples of questions they have used and found valuable. They introduce their approach through several clear, easy-to-follow steps.

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://bit.ly/SBLSSLI>



Read more about approaches to AL for team leaders on page 23.



Read about how strengths-based approaches were used in an organisation over a period of five years on page 45.

Karla Stonham and Brenda Zalter-Minden's article follows this by talking about their journey with a Solution Focus (a close ally to AI) approach to Lean Thinking at a hospital system in Canada. Over a period of three years, Karla and Brenda involved management and front-line care staff in the pursuit of efficiency in a creative, engaging and successful way. This article also shares many great tools they used.

Theo van den Eijnden and Martijn Molenaar from the Netherlands write about their experience of designing and facilitating a strengths-based *kaizen blitz* (a Lean approach to driving rapid improvement) in a Dutch government agency. Kaizen blitzes are part and parcel of most Lean programmes. Their experience, while challenging at times, highlights both the short-term and the surprising long-term impact from the refreshed blitz.

Moving on from specific tools or events, David Hansen and Rasmus Jørgensen reflect on several useful daily practices of a strengths-based approach to Lean at a medical devices manufacturing site in Denmark. While we tend to think of Lean (and AI) in terms of well-defined projects, initiatives or events, it is actually more about driving regular, on-going, daily improvements. Over a period of five years, David and Rasmus have been experimenting with various such daily practices that can successfully bring in the spirit of the strengths-based approach without adding too much complexity.

In "KISS: Keep Improving Simple and Straightforward", Hans Uijen reviews how simplifying his language and focusing on applying the practice rather than talking about it raised the effectiveness of his clients' improvements at a call centre in a financial business. In a classical, solution-focused approach, he used the simplest steps that worked to achieve what would otherwise have been frightening, full-fledged improvement projects. He changed the game from "doing" improvements to being present and caring for whatever needs to happen.

Finally, in "Human Performance Architecture Framework: Integrating Strengths-based Improvement Approaches in Large, Globally Distributed Organisations", Peter Baverso reveals how Strengths-based Lean can in itself be incorporated with other approaches, such as a complexity framework and a more "old school" analytical method, to investigate organisations while still using a strengths-based variant of the modern, startup-like, Business Model Canvas. Quite a complex framework in itself, yet results have been impressive both in terms of improvement possibilities revealed, untapped talent made visible and results achieved.

### Summary

It has been a great experience to work on this issue of *AI Practitioner* and through it celebrate the progress that has been made in the field of Strengths-based Lean around the world. From our experience and through the stories included in this edition we can clearly see how the combination of Lean Thinking and strengths-based approaches to change creates something new that is better and more powerful than simply adding the two together. We are confident that Strengths-based Lean will continue to thrive and expand even more widely around the world.

Through the stories included in this edition we can clearly see how the combination of Lean Thinking and strengths-based approaches to change creates something new that is better and more powerful than simply adding the two together.

Strengths-based Lean is truly inspiring and full of possibilities for business improvement globally. There is now an increasing interest in the application of strengths-based change to Lean, and a growing number of innovative practitioners who combine a strength/positive approach to how they work with Lean in many creative ways. It was exciting for us to learn about the various paths they take. There are simply endless possibilities – our creativity is unlimited and this journey can go far!

Our dream is that Strengths-based Lean enables a step-change in how we think of our processes, how we go about improving them and eventually how we look at and interact with the organisations we work with. It is our hope that we shift away from seeing organisations, their people and their processes as problems waiting to be solved, and towards a true sense of appreciation and inquiry that sees organisations, their processes and their people as opportunities waiting to be discovered, tapped into and expanded. This edition of *AI Practitioner* is the next step in this exciting vision!

**Editors**

**David Shaked and Nicolas Stampf**

**November 2015**



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# About the February 2016 Issue

## How Has Appreciative Inquiry Lived Up to its Promises? What Will the Future of Appreciative Inquiry Look Like?

The first article about Appreciative Inquiry was published in 1987. What has come of it? What else has Appreciative Inquiry brought to people, organisations and societies around the world? What could the originators not have imagined that has come true? What does the future hold for Appreciative Inquiry?

The first article about Appreciative Inquiry that was published in 1987 held a promise for organisations and for society: to embrace the miracle and mystery of social organising and contribute to more egalitarian forms of organisation. Now, almost thirty years later we return to that original promise and ask ourselves what has come of it. What else has Appreciative Inquiry brought to people, organisations and societies around the world that the originators could not have imagined, but that nevertheless has come true?

In this issue the authors explore this question, some from a practical point of view, others more theoretically. We delve into stories of practitioners who experienced the miracles and mysteries of working together with other people on visions, objectives, goals and projects. We have invited two scholars to elaborate on the fruits of AI, as well as the many serendipitous effects that have come with these fruits. In order to get the whole system in the room, some of the authors in this issue come from different backgrounds, and have interesting things to say about AI.

To celebrate the successes of the past is one thing; to anticipate the future another. What promises does Appreciative Inquiry have in store for us? There are many changes going on in the world. We do not live in an era of transformations anymore: we live in a transformation of eras. What is AI changing into? Is it still the same philosophy as it was thirty years ago? And if we transport ourselves into the future, to perhaps thirty years from now, what will Appreciative Inquiry look like? What will its identity, function and reputation be? These are grand questions and we are not aiming to answer them in this issue! What we do intend is to start this journey together with you as yet another mystery to embrace.

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## Purpose of AI Practitioner

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