

Nourish to Flourish

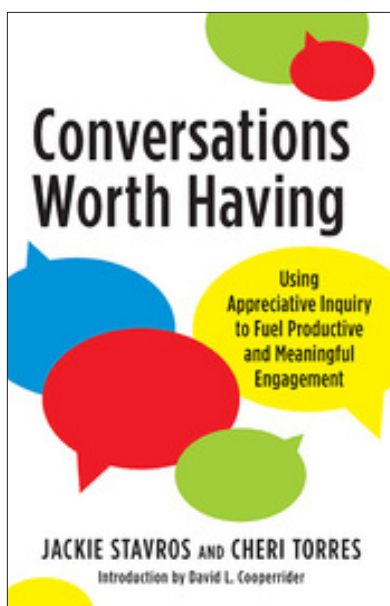
Nourish to Flourish brings together practitioners' voices and creative practices, and wide-ranging reviews of books that support strengths-based approaches to human interactions.

Book Appreciation



Neena Verma

Neena Verma, Ph.D., PCC is a scholar-practitioner of AI-based OD. She is an ICF-PCC credentialed coach, specialising in leadership, systemic and transcendence coaching. An accredited sensitivity trainer and certified AI practitioner, she has developed a number of coaching and OD models. As well as extensive editing experience, including the February 2013 and November 2016 issues of AIP, Neena has authored two books and numerous articles.



Conversations Worth Having: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel Productive and Meaningful Engagement by Jacqueline Stavros and Cheri Torres

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018 ISBN 978-1-5230-9401-1

...conversations that allow for creation of new images and metaphors ... trigger insight ... change how people think ... direction spirals upward and possibilities are generated, are the conversations worth having...

With their book *Conversations Worth Having*, Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres present a unique perspective to conversations at all levels of human engagement – individual, relationship, groups and organizations.

Conversations are at the core of human meaning-making and the social construction process. We may know each other as acquaintances, associates or in relationships. But it is through our conversations that we develop a “knowing” about each other, sometimes even about ourselves.

The authors propose that most elevating experiences happen around conversations that are appreciative in tone and inquiry-based in approach. Here, the meaning of appreciative goes beyond mere praise or compliments, and implies hope, curiosity, inspiration, genuine interest, co-creativity, possibility and more.

Conversations Worth Having and their two dimensions

The authors present a four-window view of the nature of conversation, described in two dimensions (Table 2.1, Page 29) –

The nature of the conversations	Inquiry-based	Statement-based
Appreciative	Conversations worth having	Affirmative conversations
Depreciative	Critical conversations	Destructive conversations

No prize for guessing which of these conversations are worth having! As the authors insist, conversations with an appreciative stance and inquiry-based approach “add value, strengthen connections, expand awareness, create an upward spiral of confidence, stimulate meaningful engagement and inspire positive action.” To their credit, the authors acknowledge the contextual usefulness of affirmative and critical conversations as well. Their focus, though, remains on “conversations worth having” which are facilitated by two appreciative practices.

Practice 1 – Positive framing

Capturing the spirit of AI principles, the authors suggest that “our framing and questions are fateful”. Of the many inspiring concepts that the book talks about, I find that the simple, elegant and highly effective conversational practice of Positive Framing resonates particularly with me, as practiced through a simple three step technique called *Flipping*, whereby a problem statement is –

Named » Flipped (as its positive opposite) » Framed (reframed proposition)

The authors have reinforced my belief that a problem when flipped (reframed in a way that shifts the view and moves the situation/person/process towards generative outcomes) transforms itself into a possibility hitherto unnoticed or unattended. I first learnt the art of reframing a problem into a possibility (articulating the positive opposite and reframing the proposition) from Dr Mac Odell, an acclaimed AI and positive change leader. I have practised this widely in both work and life contexts, building and broadening with my humble

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creation – an AI-inspired tool called “Fruit-Cause Synthesis”. But there will be another time and space to talk about that. Let us move on to the authors’ second appreciative practice.

Practice 2 – Generative questions

The authors begin by quoting generativity pioneer Gervase Bushe, describing the phenomenon as, “the creation of new images, metaphors, representations, that change how people think, stimulate compelling images that people act on”. Broadening the concept, authors present conversational practice of generative questions – questions that shift the tone and direction of a conversation, allowing different and diverse perspectives, bringing out unexplored wisdom, and stimulating creativity and innovation. These questions keep the focus on solutions and possibilities by inquiring about and into positive deviance, exceptional successes, unnoticed opportunities and unexplored potential. You may want to read real-time examples of generative questions (Table 3.2, Page 61, Chapter 3) and the impact they create. If for some reason you can’t read the whole book but want to experiment with its core offering, begin with these conversational practices, in Chapter 3.

That said, I would like to believe that once you pick it up, you will be immersed in the book, if for no other reason, then surely for the heart-warming and wisdom-inspiring real-time stories that the authors share from their rich professional practice and personal experience. Each story offers a unique way to transform potentially unproductive, even damaging conversations into those worth having, thereby opening space for collaborative exploration, creative dialogue and possibilities for innovation. Each of these stories leaves one wiser.

They say sometimes the endings are openings for new vistas, and the story about Ally Stavros (daughter of author Jackie Stavros) in the last chapter is that hallmark story. This story brings out the unique any time, any place, any situation meaningfulness aspect of conversations, that is the topic of this chapter. This story touched my heart most warmly and resonated with my own life story – bearing loss and transcending grief as a bereaved parent. What is helping me stay in faith and continue to have reverence for life is the deep appreciation mindset, including towards my loss, without denying my pain. As Ally wisely puts, “desperate times ... should never have to go through again, but if so ... I know where and how to start the conversation”. In that sense, this book makes a distinctive appeal in helping one learn the value and art of having a generative conversation with oneself.

Lo and behold, there is more in this seemingly small book – the art of whole-system conversations that tap into collective wisdom and unleash systemic potential. Organizational development and change practitioners would sure love this. Do read the Fairmount story (Page 86, Chapter 5) of using AI to leverage the power of whole-system conversations.

All this is not unrealistically positivity-biased. The authors back their long and rich practice-based knowledge with the conceptual soundness of Appreciative Inquiry principles, and grounded research from new science, positive-image/positive-action, and positive psychology areas. They cite findings from neurological research about the brain chemistry caused by strong beliefs and imagery, and the brain processing of imagery. And they draw insight from the positive psychology research about positive emotions.

I loved reading and writing an appreciation-review for this book. I resonate most with the two practices of positive framing and generative questions. As practitioner of generative conversations, I know firsthand the value they create. The book flows with ease, appeal and impact. I highly recommend this book to leaders, coaches, OD and change practitioners, and just about anyone who is keen to kindle and enhance generativity in life and work. So, what more to expect from the authors? I would love more about the how – the process of designing conversations worth having. They have talked lucidly about the “what” and the “why” of conversations worth having. They have also explained the “how” of it, albeit mostly with help of stories and examples. I hope authors offer a more nuanced explanation of the process of designing conversations worth having. This could be immensely helpful for uninitiated-yet-keen learners, and of course also for those more experienced. Maybe in an expanded edition?

The book is easily available on all online market places, including Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/Conversations-Worth-Having-Appreciative-Productive/dp/152309401X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1530615681&sr=8-1&keywords=conversations+worth+havin



Jackie Stavros (left)

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Cheri Torres (right)

Cheri Torres is a senior consultant at NextMove.is, partner at Innovation Partners International, and an associate at the Taos Institute. She works with organizations in every sector to support effective leadership, team excellence, and culture change. She has trained thousands of trainers and teachers in the use and practice of Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Facilitation.

Discover more about both the authors and the book at

<https://www.conversationsworthhaving.today/meet-the-authors/>

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