

**Revealing Hidden Strengths at Work: Unleashing Your Employees', Stakeholders', and Organization's Greatest Potential**

Duncan C. Ferguson

Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program, University of Pennsylvania

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Advisor: Andrew Soren

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a theory of how to best uncover and use strengths in the workplace. The discovery, understanding, and use of strengths is central to positive psychology. Strengths are vital in life and at work. Not all individuals use their strengths effectively at work. Those who do, do better for themselves and their organizations. Further, strengths can be hidden from self, others, or both. Hidden strengths can be revealed, developed, and used. Perhaps there are specific factors and contexts that can uncover a myriad of unexpected strengths for use by individuals, groups, and organizations. This paper proposes mattering, psychological safety, the Pygmalion effect, engagement with the whole system, whole systems thinking, and leveraging strengths born of difference as key factors in uncovering and utilizing strengths in the workplace. It explores how the literature supports aspects of this thesis. The overarching thesis is put forth for exploration, discussion, and investigation.

*Keywords:* hidden strengths, uncovering strengths, whole system engagement, mattering, psychological safety, Pygmalion effect, appreciative inquiry, leveraging difference, workplace, organizations

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*“Any human anywhere will blossom in a hundred unexpected talents and capacities simply by being given the opportunity to do so.”*

-attributed to Doris Lessing

## **Introduction**

### **A Personal Note**

I am motivated to write this paper based on my experience in the workplace as well as what I know of other people's experience. Years ago, I was deeply interested in psychology and group process but soon became sidetracked because I and the people around me fundamentally misunderstood my strengths and the contexts in which they were relevant. In fact, often the work cultures I was involved with had no interest in my strengths or their utilization. “Do you want to work, or do you not want to work?” I was asked by a builder for whom I was employed. Having lost my way, no longer identifying with my passions and in need of a paycheck I decided that I wanted to work. From there I went into a lengthy master's program and career in architecture, a field requiring the kind of broad technical mastery that was never my strength. Working my way out of the frying pan into the fire I got into IT and coding. Being even more technical, this was a worse fit. Realizing this, I took another career turn into resident engagement and community building at low-income apartment communities. While this was a much closer fit it still didn't fully utilize my best self. Of course, there have been times throughout my careers where I've used my strengths. I've found countless opportunities to exercise leadership, fairness, perspective, and creativity. I was able to foster friendship, collaboration, and positive collective endeavors that have indeed built community and improved lives. But in that journey, I've also come to realize that if I can pursue my strengths and passions directly, as I am doing through the field of applied positive psychology, I have the capacity to blossom in a hundred unexpected

ways, simply be being given the opportunity to do so. I share this to help explain my personal interest in and commitment to the focus of this paper.

### **Introductory Road Map & Overview**

Research shows that the awareness and use of strengths in the workplace improves performance and job satisfaction (Miglianico et al., 2020). But too many people seem unable to bring their full and best selves to work. Indeed, my experience is when an individual's true strengths are unrecognized, not only does their happiness at work suffer, but so does their productivity and, I believe, the organization's opportunity to maximize its human potential and resources. This realization is inspired by three things: many years of observing that people whose strengths are utilized seem far happier and productive, that too many people seem to have poor job/career fit relative to their strengths, and an unabashed faith in people, as exemplified by the quote from Doris Lessing. How can one not be excited and enthralled, or at least intrigued by what Lessing offers? Whether Lessing is correct, it behooves us to treat her as such and investigate. So, what constitutes *the opportunity to do so*?

What follows is the outline of a theory with six interrelated factors that I believe constitute *the opportunity to do so*. While not intended to be a comprehensive list of everything required, I believe these factors would take us a long way toward the kind of blossoming that Lessing describes.

The six factors are as follows. First is mattering. Mattering is the experience of being respected and valued for who you are combined with the ability to add value (Prilleltensky, 2020). Second is feeling comfortable and at ease with one's work colleagues such that one can offer up creative ideas, make mistakes, engage with and critique others' opinions without fear of criticism. This is known as psychological safety (PS) (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Third is a

supervisor having confidence in a subordinate and this having a positive effect on the subordinate's performance. This is known as the Pygmalion effect (PE) (White & Locke, 2000). Fourth and perhaps most important is employees' collaborative engagement with their entire organization's stakeholder pool around significant organizational decisions or strategic goals, as exemplified by the appreciative inquiry summit (Cooperrider, 2012). This includes fostering a sense of belonging. It includes leveraging difference, i.e., effectively utilizing the variety of strategically relevant strengths that exist due to differences between people (Davidson, 2011). It also includes whole system thinking, understanding the importance of context and the interdependence of relationships within any given organization or system of strengths (Kern et al., 2020).

Consider this paper a thought experiment based on personal experience. My theory of *the opportunity to do so* is a hypothesis to be pondered, studied, and elaborated upon. There is positive psychology literature that supports each of these factors as will be shown below.

I start with an introduction to positive psychology including how it can contribute to revealing hidden strengths in an organizational context. Then I discuss strengths, what they are, and how they matter in the workplace. This includes how seeing, understanding, and using strengths is key, and that doing so can benefit individuals and organizations. Next I discuss how strengths can be hidden and subsequently revealed, developed, and utilized. I touch on the Johari window, a theory of how aspects of people can be hidden and revealed. Then comes a brief overview of each factor followed by the bulk of the paper which elaborates on the power of each factor to uncover and utilize individual, group, and organizational strengths, as summarized here: Mattering can motivate the uncovering of hidden strengths. Psychological safety (PS) and the Pygmalion effect (PE) provide psychological conditions that support doing so. The best

circumstance for most powerfully revealing and utilizing hidden strengths within the organizational context is whole system engagement as exemplified by appreciative inquiry (AI). The AI summit can support the other factors in the collaborative uncovering and utilizing of strengths to further collective visions and goals. I discuss aspects of the practice and theory of AI including engaging all stakeholders in finding and using strengths. I discuss whole system thinking, as exemplified by systems informed positive psychology (SIPP) and leveraging difference, utilizing the variety of strengths that arise from differences to further positive collective organizational objectives, and how both integrate with and support whole system engagement and the AI summit.

## **Introduction to Positive Psychology**

### ***Description and History of Positive Psychology***

Positive Psychology (PP) is the scientific study of well-being and how to foster it (Seligman, 2011). The recent PP movement was initiated in 1998 when then president of the American Psychological Association Martin E. P. Seligman urged the profession of psychology to study well-being and what makes life worth living. He intended to bring balance to the field given the vast majority of research and clinical efforts were focused on mental illness (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi pointed out that understanding well-being and what makes life worth living is a worthy underexplored endeavor, and very different from the important goal of understanding and alleviating misery (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000).

Per Christopher Peterson (2006) PP has three pillars, positive experiences, traits, and institutions. Positive experiences include happiness, satisfaction, enjoyment, and positive emotions. Traits include character strengths, skills, values, and passions. Positive institutions can



include family, workplaces, religion, schools, communities. Peterson included personal relationships with positive institutions and in an acknowledgement of their importance to PP and well-being, famously said “other people matter” (Peterson, 2006, p. 93). There is a theoretical flow to how the three pillars can relate. Positive institutions can support the development of positive traits which can lead to positive experiences (Peterson, 2006). The acknowledgment of the importance of other people and institutions notwithstanding, PP’s focus, especially early on, tended toward the individual and their positive experiences and traits, (Kern et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2020).

The focus on positive experiences, traits, and institutions left PP open to criticism for being too focused on the positive and not acknowledging the value of the negative (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). Partly in response to this criticism PP embraced both the reality and importance of negative emotions. PP has demonstrated an understanding of the potential value of anger, fear, and even anxiety (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). The criticism notwithstanding from early on PP espoused that flourishing is promoted by a preponderance of positive emotions, not their complete dominance. Fredrickson’s research (2001; 2009) determined that a 3/1 or higher ratio of positive to negative emotions promotes human flourishing and that well-being can be furthered through a relationship between negative and positive emotions. She used the analogy of a sailboat. The sail represents positivity the keel negativity, their proportionate sizes being about 3/1. The keel provides meaning and direction, the sail the capacity to move in that direction (Fredrickson, 2009). Reivich & Shatte (2002) provide an example. The founders of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) had the horribly negative experience of losing children to drunk driving accidents. This traumatic experience which no doubt evoked profound sorrow and anger gave them purpose and direction: working to prevent drunk driving through the creation of

MADD. Positive emotions, which broaden and build mental, physical, and psychological capacity (Fredrickson, 2009) in turn provided the capacity and strength to move in that direction (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). It is worth noting that the merits of the 3 to 1 ratio espoused by Fredrickson (2001; 2009) has been disputed (Friedman & Brown, 2018).

As the field has demonstrated understanding of the value of the negative, over time it has also embraced more fully the importance of relationships. This is exemplified by Fredrickson's book *Love 2.0: Finding happiness and health in moments of connection* (2013) which espouses the importance of positive connections with others in everyday life as profound sources of well-being. Demonstrating a change toward valuing relationship more Jonathan Haidt said he used to think happiness came from within but now realizes it comes from between. Specifically, from finding the right relationships between oneself and others, between self and occupation, and between self and something greater (Haidt, 2012).

In an acknowledgement of the importance of relationships, institutions, and context PP has embraced and been embraced by other disciplines beyond psychology. This includes High Quality Connections (HQC) in the workplace in the field of positive organizational scholarship (POS). HQCs are "short-term, dyadic, interactions that are positive in terms of the subjective experience of the connected individuals and the structural features of the connection" (Stephens et al., 2011, p. 2). It includes Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a positive organizational development (POD) methodology that seeks out strengths and what's working in organizations as a foundation upon which to imagine and build positive collective futures (Cooperrider, 2012; Cooperrider et al., 2008).

As of the writing of this paper there are indications that a new stage in the evolution of PP, what has been called a third wave, may be beginning. This new phase as described by Lomas

et al. (2020) involves acknowledging the central importance of the interconnectivity of human beings, of context, culture, and nuance (Lomas et al., 2020). It involves deepening and expanding interdisciplinary explorations as exemplified by the newly emerging field of Systems Informed Positive Psychology (SIPP) (Kern et al., 2020). SIPP explicitly brings systems science together with PP, focusing on social systems such as families, communities, businesses, and educational organizations. This potential new phase seems to be beginning to address more directly differences between cultures and circumstances and to branch out beyond the western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) origin and focus PP has tended to have to date (Lomas et al., 2020). Along these lines, PP has been criticized for not embracing disenfranchised groups relative to race, ethnicity, and gender (Rao & Donaldson, 2015, as cited in Lomas et al., 2020).

### ***What Positive Psychology and Associated Fields can do for Organizations***

The science of positive psychology can help empower organizations and their stakeholders toward collective and individual success. PP and related fields and methodologies offer approaches that can reveal strengths of individuals, groups and organizations and offer ways to employ those strengths to further organizational goals through appreciative inquiry, leveraging difference, SIPP, and discovering strengths (Cooperrider, 2012; Davidson, 2011; Lomas et al., 2020; Niemiec, 2019). It can help organizations discover employees who have unrealized or underutilized strengths that can support business strategies (Davidson, 2011). Through HQCs it can help build high-quality effective, and creative work and business relationships that are more efficient, creative, and satisfactory (Stephens et al., 2011; Dutton 2003). PP provides specific approaches that can foster and support effective team engagement such as psychological safety (PS), the belief that one can safely take risks at work (Edmondson,

1999). PP offers occupational fit and role-strengths matching through job crafting, a method that supports workers bringing out their strengths and passions at work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2010).

Having been initiated in 1998, positive psychology is still young. It has endeavored to steer the field of psychology toward studying well-being as well as mental illness. Initially tending to focus on the positive and the individual it has matured, for example, to embrace more fully the value of relationships and group and institutional context and may be beginning a new phase of incorporating systems, context, and difference to a much greater degree. PP and approaches it embraces can help organizations uncover and utilize individual and organizational strengths and capacities to further organizational objectives.

### **Discovering Hidden Strengths**

Below, I discuss what strengths are, why they matter in the workplace, how they can be hidden, and how they can be discovered and fostered to benefit individuals and organizations.

There are many types of strengths such as interests, that which draws us; talents, things we are naturally good at; skills, abilities that we cultivate; resources, capacities outside of ourselves that we have access to; values, what is important to us; and character strengths (Niemi, 2018). Currently there are three prominent schools of thought regarding strengths (Miglianico et al., 2020). The Gallup Organization developed an approach which identifies 34 “talents” that can lead to high performance (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Clifton & Harter, 2003). Talents are defined as “our naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior, that can be productively applied” (Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 1). Per these authors, this approach posits that talent-based strengths can be expanded by improving knowledge and skills (Clifton & Harter, 2003).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) exemplify a second approach, the VIA Character Strengths. Character Strengths (CS) are capacities that are part of our identity. They create positive outcomes for the individual who possesses them and for others. They are valued across cultures, support good, and are fulfilling to use. CS are positive traits, capacities, or aspects of personality that when utilized well contribute to human flourishing (Niemiec, 2018; 2021). All people have them and using them brings satisfaction. They connect with, drive, and support all other strengths, are innate and always available when seen, understood, and engaged (Niemiec, 2018; 2021).

A third school of thought regarding strengths comes from the Center for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) and the work of Alex Linley (Miglianico et al., 2020). This approach defines a strength as: “a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance” (Linley 2008, p. 9). This approach holds that all people have strengths, that the most significant potential for improvement comes from a person’s strengths, and that the easiest way to make the biggest impact is through focusing on strengths (Miglianico et al., 2020).

### ***Strengths Matter***

**The Importance of the Use of Strengths in the Workplace.** A literature review by Miglianico et al. (2020) demonstrates that the benefits of strengths use in the workplace include improvements in job performance, engagement, job satisfaction, and group functioning. These authors identified 598 relevant academic articles that have explored strengths at work. They narrowed them to 27 key studies all of which were peer reviewed, utilized quantitative data, focused exclusively on employees and the workplace, and investigated multiple strengths. All studies they reviewed have been published since 1998 when the field of positive psychology was

born. Based on this review they determined that understanding strengths can be of great benefit to organizations because the utilization of strengths is positively associated with job performance and work engagement. Employers that support the use of workers' strengths benefit from increases in profit, sales, and productivity (Miglianico et al., 2020). A separate Gallup report supports this. It found that people who make use of their strengths at work are six times more likely to be engaged in their work tasks (Sorenson, 2014).

**The Knowledge and Use of Strengths are Key.** Studies have found that not just the presence of strengths, but the knowledge of strengths is required to benefit from them. Linley (2008) expresses the importance of realizing strengths in both senses of the word, to see and acknowledge them, and to put them to use, to realize their potential. The literature review by Miglianico et al. (2020) found that knowing one's strengths and intentionally building and using them improves an individuals' proactivity and level of performance (Cable et al., 2013; Dubreuil et al., 2014; Harzer & Ruch, 2014; Van Wingerden & Van der Stoep, 2018; Van Woerkom et al., 2015; as cited in Miglianico et al., 2020). It also improves the degree to which one assists coworkers (Kong & Ho, 2016; Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017; as cited in Miglianico et al., 2020), one's level of creativity (Lee et al., 2016, as cited in Miglianico et al., 2020) and ability to adapt to change (Dubreuil et al., 2014, as cited in Miglianico et al., 2020). They found strengths awareness, development, and use increases worker engagement at work (Cable et al., 2015; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017; Van Wingerden & Van der Stoep 2018; Van Woerkom et al., 2015; as cited in Miglianico et al., 2020). Miglianico et al. (2020) also found the use of strengths in the workplace improves job satisfaction, supports a sense of meaning, and correlates with improvements in intrinsic motivation and feelings of having an impact. Strengths use also furthers a sense of self-efficacy and optimism which keeps people

engaged, and engaged workers tend to want to remain engaged (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018, as cited in Miglianico et al., 2020).

**Strengths Are Often Not Utilized.** Not using strengths may be due to a lack of awareness. In other instances, it may be due to poor person-job fit. The Gallup Organization has found that only 36% of workers in the United States are actively engaged in the workplace (Clifton & Harter, 2021). That means that 64% are either not particularly engaged or are positively disengaged. If people are not actively engaged their strengths are not being fully utilized.

**Intentionally Improving the Utilization of Employee Strengths May Significantly Benefit Organizations.** This can occur through fostering engagement and initiative which may be particularly important in today's difficult economic climate (Miglianico et al., 2020). This literature review found that encouraging workers to employ their strengths improves their ability to handle workloads and reduces absenteeism. Linley (2008) suggests that an individual's greatest potential for positive development is through the growth of their strengths, and the greatest positive change to be made with the least effort comes from focusing on people's strengths. And a literature review by Ghielen et al. (2018) of 18 strengths intervention studies from 2011-2018 shows strengths interventions were associated with improved engagement and performance at work. This review also demonstrated that strengths interventions can lead to improvements in group performance such as better "information sharing" and increased "class cohesion" in an educational setting (Ghielen et al., 2018).

***Strengths can be Hidden, then Revealed, Fostered, and Utilized***

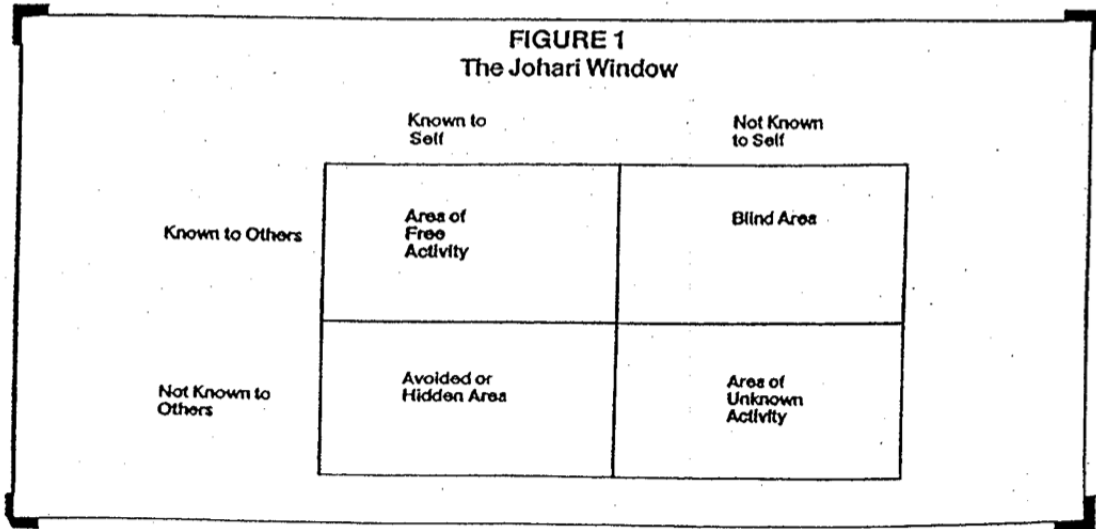
As demonstrated above, being aware of one's strengths is key, and not a given. I believe any of the various types of strengths can be hidden in the sense that self and others are not fully

aware them. One can be unaware of available resources, out of touch with one's values, distressed enough to not be fully conscious of interests or innate talents, or forgetful of skills one has cultivated. There seems to be little literature on hidden strengths in the workplace.

Nevertheless, prominent strengths experts have expressed that lack awareness of one's strengths is common and a problem to be addressed (Niemic, 2018; Linley 2008). There appears to be little data currently to support this. Clearly more studies are needed. Nevertheless, awareness of one's strengths is key. If people's strengths are hidden from their own awareness, how can they perform well at work? There is a theory that succinctly describes how aspects of people and groups can be hidden.

**The Johari Window.** This theory models how parts of ourselves are hidden and other parts revealed. Luft & Ingham (1961) describe degrees to which behavior and motivation are hidden from or revealed to self and others. As explained below strengths are included in behavior and motivation. These authors present a four-quadrant model (see Figure 1 below, from Luft & Ingham, 1961, p.1). These quadrants from left-to-right and top-to-bottom are as follows: *quadrant I*, the *open area*, where behavior and motivation are seen by self and others; *quadrant II*, the *blind area*, where behavior and motivation are known to others but hidden from the self; *quadrant III*, the *hidden area*, hidden from others but known to the self; and *quadrant IV*, the *mystery area*, hidden from both self and others. They refer to quadrant I as the *area of free activity*. This is where an individual can work effectively with others because their motivation and behavior are known to self and others (Luft & Ingham, 1961).





*Note.* From “The Johari Window: A graphic model of awareness in interpersonal relations,” by J. Luft & H. Ingham, 1961, *Human Relations Training News*, 5(9), p. 1. Copyright NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science.

Aspects of a person which are hidden or revealed are called behaviors and motivations. This appears to include strengths because the authors state when the open area is large people’s resources and skills are available to the group (Luft & Ingham, 1961). Resources and skills are strengths (Niemic, 2018; Prilleltensky, 2020). At work when my “resources and skills,” a.k.a. strengths, are either hidden from me, as in the *blind area*, revealed to me but I choose to hide them from the group, as in the *hidden area*, or unknown to me and others, as in the *mystery area* they cannot be utilized within the group context.

This hidden or revealed dynamic is about interaction with others. We all need feedback from others to decrease our blind area and increase our open area making us more aware of our strengths and making more of our authentic selves available to engage with the group toward collective goals. When you give me feedback, I learn about myself and grow. I can teach you about myself by revealing parts of my hidden area. In sharing more of myself I can learn about your hidden area by observing your reaction to parts of me of which you were unaware. I now see parts of you that had been hidden. As we expand the open area for each member of a team

more behaviors, motivations, resources, and skills are collectively known. We can then choose to use these collectively to further group goals (Luft & Ingham, 1961).

It isn't always easy or possible to expand the open area, nor is it always desirable. It is important to be respectful of what people are willing to reveal and what they are not. The easiest to share is the hidden area which is consciously known to the self. When parts of the hidden area are revealed it often becomes clear that they have been influencing relationships all along. More difficult to reveal is the blind area because there tend to be psychological reasons why an individual is unaware of specific aspects of themselves. The mystery area is the most difficult to reveal being unknown to everyone (Luft & Ingham, 1916).

When a group is newly formed the open area is usually small. Over time if trust increases and the group matures the open area expands making more resources and skills of all members known and available to support collective goals. It seems likely that trust as expressed here is similar to psychological safety, discussed below.

The Johari Window also applies to interactions between groups. A group can be unaware of certain resources or motivations it possesses of which other groups are aware, aware of aspects of itself that it keeps from other groups, and have aspects that are unknown to itself and other groups (Luft & Ingham, 1961).

### ***Procession of Strengths-Enabling Factors***

There may be a flow to the factors described in this paper regarding how they support uncovering hidden strengths. It may be that mattering, feeling valued and having the ability to add value, serves as motivation to uncover and use strengths. If I believe people on my work team value what I have to contribute and I have the opportunity to make a real difference, I will be energized to better see and understand my strengths and how to best use them to further

collective priorities. It may be that psychological safety (PS) and the Pygmalion effect (PE) help provide a context that enables a person to realize their best strengths. If the group I am a part of encourages my creativity, uplifts learning from my mistakes, responds positively to my constructive criticisms (PS), and if my supervisor communicates confidence in my abilities (PE), I'm likely to feel more comfortable utilizing the motivation mattering provides to discover and engage my best strengths and capacities.

With mattering, PS, and PE in place, what circumstances can best bring strengths to light and most effectively utilize them? The answer is intentional engagement with the entire organization to develop and seek positive collective goals. This brings everyone together to uncover relevant strengths and design how to use them collectively to accomplish a desired future. Through working together toward a collective purpose comes heightened motivation and increased capacity to discover all our strengths and combine them to achieve mutual goals. Davidson's approach (2011) supports this by helping organizations see, understand, engage, and leverage the strengths behind difference.

The ability to work together as a whole to discover and utilize strengths may be furthered by an understanding of the nature and importance of organizational context, relationships, and mutual influence. The theoretical underpinnings of SIPP and AI can help provide this. By understanding the theory of SIPP and AI, practicing AI, and leveraging difference, individuals and work teams can become part of a consciously evolving and growing system that uncovers strengths and utilizes collective engagement to create positive outcomes at the individual, team, and whole system levels.

Within the context of an AI summit all factors described above can take place concurrently. The AI summit can almost instantaneously generate mattering, feeling valued and

the ability to add value, create psychological safety, through PE demonstrate leadership's confidence in the individual participants, and begin effectively leveraging difference. It can provide an experiential understanding of the nature of systems, interrelationships, and context, a.k.a. whole systems thinking as supported by SIPP.

### **Unleashing Hidden Strengths**

#### **Discovering Hidden Strengths**

Below I delve into each of the factors in more depth. Keep in mind the notion of a loose progression from one to another. It's not that the process is linear starting with mattering and ending with leveraging difference. It's that mattering can function as a motivator to discover new strengths. PS and PE can help enable this discovery. Understanding how we operate as a system (SIPP), engagement with the whole (AI), and wisely leveraging difference can provide the most fertile context for revealing and utilizing collective strengths.

#### **Mattering: Being Valued and Adding Value**

Mattering is the experience of being valued and adding value within a social system or oneself (Prilleltensky, 2016; 2020). Mattering is important because it may be the motivator for people to discover and utilize their strengths within an organizational context. The sense of being valued, "I matter," creates motivation to add value, to use my strengths to benefit the organization to which I matter. When people feel they matter at work they tend to be engaged, motivated, and may be more aware of and make more use of their skills (Prilleltensky, 2020). The opposite is also true. When I feel I don't matter, that I don't have strengths that can add value, that dampens my motivation to discover, reveal, and make use of my strengths.

Prilleltensky's mattering wheel below diagrams how mattering works (2020). Mattering exist within four contexts, the self, personal relationships with friends and family, relationships

at work, and relationship with the broader community. The left side of the mattering wheel represents feeling valued by each of these as shown by the arrows pointing inward toward “feeling valued.” Feeling valued tends to lead to adding value represented by the arrows pointing toward community, work, relationships, and the self on the right. All eight interconnect and impact each other. The experience of adding value in turn leads toward feeling even more valued and the cycle repeats and builds upon itself (Prilleltensky, 2020). How do people add value? By utilizing their strengths such as talents, capacities, experience, skills, expertise, character strengths, resources, and knowledge.

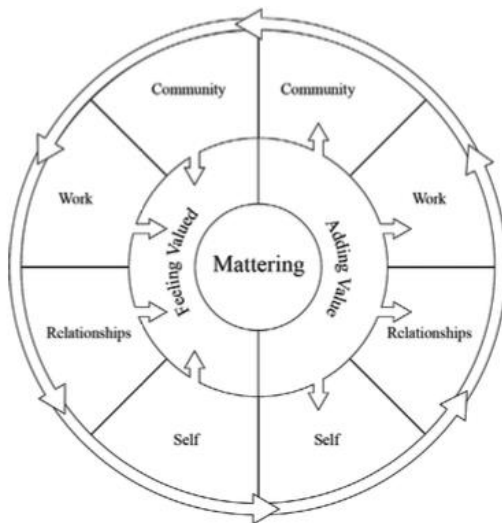


Fig. 1 The mattering wheel: A conceptual framework

*Note.* From “Mattering at the intersection of psychology, philosophy and politics,” by I. Prilleltensky, 2020, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 65(1-2), p. 21. Copyright John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

People have a need to add value. Prilleltensky (2020) points out three theories that support this: self-determination theory, self-efficacy, and meaning in life. Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to accomplish one’s goals (Bandura, 1995; 2001, as cited in Prilleltensky, 2020). This belief is essential to people actively contributing to the world or adding value. The belief in our ability to accomplish what we set out to contributes to the will to act and do things.

This includes getting out of bed in the morning, preparing a meal, going to work or school, starting a career, or accomplishing a task at work (Prilleltensky, 2020). Self-determination theory posits that the type of motivation one experiences is important to well-being. A person can be motivated internally through genuine interest for example. This is called intrinsic motivation. A person can be motivated for external reasons such as praise, money, or good grades in school. This is extrinsic motivation. The level of motivation provided by each can be equally high, but the former is in keeping with self-determination and well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2015). We have a need to act intrinsically, adding value from internal motivation. Third, meaning in life is a human need and involves having a sense of purpose, coherence, and mattering. Coherence involves a feeling that things are in order, and comprehensible (Costin & Vignoles, 2020). Purpose can consist of raising a family, having a successful career, or improving other people's lives (Prilleltensky, 2020).

To fulfill the need to add value we must use some part of ourselves that creates a benefit, namely a strength or capacity. So, mattering serves as a motivator to use strengths. It stands to reason it's a motivator to discover and reveal them as well. If a person feels valued by a group, given people have a need to add value, it seems they would be motivated to uncover their hidden strengths to use them to add value. Per the Johari window, described above, that would include strengths hidden from others, hidden from oneself, and perhaps those hidden from both (Luft & Ingham, 1961).

Additional studies offer support for the above notion that believing one's work matters to one's organization is related to being motivated to contribute, i.e., use strengths at work. For example, mattering promotes productivity and engagement at work, in addition to well-being (Dutton et al., 2016; Jung & Heppner, 2017; Shuck & Reio, 2014; as cited in Prilleltensky,

2020). More specifically when an organization's culture supports workers feeling valued and a sense that worker contributions are meaningful, this improves productivity and well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Grawitch & Ballard, 2016; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; as cited in Prilleltensky, 2020). If mattering leads to engagement and productivity, it stands to reason it leads to using one's strengths. How can a worker be engaged and productive without use of their strengths? Someone who is engaged and productive must be using more of their strengths than someone who is not. Further supporting this, if indirectly, is that mattering is associated with employee retention, job satisfaction, the assumption of leadership roles, and work-place promotions (Reece et al., 2021). These all seem likely to require or result from using strengths. Although the above studies suggest it, research establishing that mattering relates to strengths use could be called for. That said, what is more lacking is research showing mattering motivates uncovering hidden strengths. The absence of such research notwithstanding, I suggest it is likely true. If mattering leads to being motivated to use strengths, this will tend to motivate people to uncover hidden strengths. The Johari window, discussed above, is a theoretical model that may exemplify this. I may be motivated to reveal and use strengths I had previously hidden from my workgroup. I may be motivated to ask for feedback on what strengths they see in me that I am unaware of.

### **Supportive Work Team**

Years ago, I was chair of the board of a nonprofit. Over a 12-month period I led the organization through two significant crises. One involved an organized outside group that publicly expressed their anger at my organization. We held meetings, some contentious, with these outside stakeholders. The other crisis was hidden from the public and most members of the organization. Both involved considerable use of my character strengths of leadership and

perspective, which helped me lead the organization successfully through both. I used perspective to understand the views of the outside group and demonstrate they had been heard. This helped find common ground and reduce anger. I used leadership skills in the second instance by crafting several meetings to include all viewpoints and bring the group to a vital consensus. This was not only rewarding; in a sense it was easy. What I needed to do as a leader came naturally. I felt at home at that institution and safe with that group of leaders. I trusted them, and they me. I felt safe to take risks, say what I thought, and make bold assertions and decisions without fear of being maliciously undermined, unduly criticized, or my future negatively impacted. I experienced psychological safety. I also knew that I was valued by my fellow leaders. I knew my skill sets were valued and I could use them to add value. I knew I mattered. I blossomed with talents and capacities, because the context provided me with *the opportunity to do so*.

The psychological environment created by a team can profoundly support or undermine the discovery and effective use of team member strengths. Likewise individuals in the workplace can make use of positive relationships with their co-workers to help promote their strengths (Kahn, 2005; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003; as cited in Stephens et al., 2013). If mattering provides the motivation for uncovering and utilizing strengths at work, factors of team context and engagement may help support it. PS and PE may support individuals in uncovering and utilizing strengths laying the groundwork for effective team engagement.

If a person feels there are positive consequences and no negative consequences to utilizing their strengths, i.e., if they experience psychological safety, they likely will use them. The literature supports this specifically for ideas and creativity (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017) but does not seem to for “strengths” per se. However, creativity is a strength, being, for example, one of the 24 character strengths in the VIA system



(Niemiec, 2018). Niemiec defines creativity as “thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things” (2018, p. 122). It is defined as “the generation of novel ideas” by Frazier et al. (2017, p. 121). So, ideas are related to creativity and creativity is a strength. The generation of idea being a strength may also be supported by VIA classification of character strengths which include love of learning, judgement/critical thinking, and perspective (Niemiec, 2018).

### ***Psychological Safety***

Psychological safety (PS) is the sense that one can take interpersonal risks at work safely (Edmondson, 1999), that it is safe to share opinions and creative ideas, provide constructive criticism, and to make mistakes without fear of judgement (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). PS may lay groundwork to bring one’s best strengths out for the self and others to see and use. The Johari Window authors seem to agree. Recall they suggested that as group trust grows people’s behaviors, motivations, resources, and skills become revealed and available for group use (Luft & Ingham, 1961). Trust is highly related to PS (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In addition, studies have shown that PS is positively related to engagement at work, as well as group- and individual-level task performance, creativity, learning behavior, and the sharing of ideas and information (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

The Frazier et al. (2017) meta-analysis, cited above, reviewed 457 studies. They narrowed those down to 117 studies with 136 independent samples using the following three criteria: The studies needed to define PS similarly to the meta-analysis authors who mostly utilized the definition by Edmondson (1999). The statistics needed to be appropriate for the meta-analysis, for example including sample size and effect size. Lastly only primary studies were included. This meta-analysis found that PS was significantly and positively related to all

outcomes shown below for both individuals and groups. Estimated corrected correlations between PS and outcomes relevant to this paper were as follows:

- Engagement (individual = .45; group = .44)
- Task performance (individual = .43; group = .29)
- Information sharing (individual = .52; group = .50)
- Creativity (individual = .13; group = .29)
- Learning behavior (individual = .62; group = .52).

Notice the remarkably high numbers for learning behavior and information sharing.

Significance for all five outcomes for both individual and group level analyses are confirmed by the lower and upper limits of a 95% confidence interval not crossing zero. A separate literature review similarly found PS leads to positive outcomes for organizations including fostering the sharing of knowledge, increasing innovation, engagement, and creativity, and improving performance (Newman et al., 2017).

Psychological safety can have a positive impact on people's engagement with the whole system of which they are a part. It improves engagement with and commitment to an institution and supports effective collaboration between diverse groups and individuals allowing for the harnessing of the benefits of difference (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). When PS is present expertise diversity supports team performance. Expertise diversity is the variety of "types of knowledge, skills, and capabilities team members possess as a result of education, experience, and natural ability" (Van der Vegt et al., 2006, p. 877). When PS is lacking, expertise diversity shows a negative impact on team performance (Newman et al., 2017; Martins et al., 2013). PS may thereby be a catalyst for leveraging difference (Davidson, 2011) described in more detail below.

*The Pygmalion Effect*

In my past career I worked under an individual who had a great deal of confidence and trust in me. Due to this he frequently provided me with pertinent information relevant to the task at hand including technical and process information as well as personality and political information regarding outside consultants and internal senior staff. He did this because of his confidence in me and my ability to use the information wisely. The information he shared gave me tools I would not have had otherwise that enabled me to use my strengths of perspective and social intelligence to build more effective work relationships and protect myself from potential political pitfalls. It facilitated my strength of thoroughness in generating competent and comprehensive technical and procedural documents, processes, and outcomes.

My story above demonstrates the power of the Pygmalion effect (PE) to promote strengths utilization. PE is the belief by others, especially a superior, in one's ability to generate positive contributions, and the resultant positive impact on the individual's belief in themselves and subsequent productive behavior (McNatt, 2000; White & Locke, 2000). PE when used in a conscious, positive way to demonstrate favorable beliefs in a subordinate can promote self-efficacy (McNatt, 2000; White & Locke, 2000; Eden, 1992). Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to accomplish goals (Bandura, 1995; 2001, as cited in Prillelttensky, 2020). With a resultant "I can" attitude an individual may be motivated to discover and utilize their strengths. PE can be positive or negative depending on the superior's opinions of the subordinate's abilities. In this paper when I refer to PE I am always referring to the positive effect unless otherwise noted.

The original classic example of PE is described in a book by Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968, as cited in White & Locke, 2000). They conducted a study in which new elementary

school teachers were told certain students were expected to perform well and others poorly. The two groups of students were chosen randomly and had equivalent average scores at the beginning of the school year. At the end of the year the scores of those expected to perform well were much higher than the scores of the other group. The teachers were unaware they treated the groups differently, although they did (White & Locke, 2000).

A superior's positive expectations of another person can result in that superior subconsciously exhibiting supportive behaviors, which can then positively impact the individual's belief in their own abilities. This belief in turn can impact how effectively that person uses their strengths to accomplish goals, in the above case academic achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968, as cited in White & Locke, 2000). In a survey of the literature on PE, McNatt (2020) summarizes that when teachers believe in the competence of students they provide more warmth, more support, and more feedback about performance, they engage students in more difficult assignments, and give them more time to formulate answers to questions. These supportive teacher behaviors likely created fertile ground for activating student strengths which led to better academic performance. Achievement and performance in school has been shown to be predicted by strengths, specifically love of learning, creativity, curiosity, self-regulation, prudence, perseverance, and authenticity (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). All these are strengths that could be spotted and acknowledged by teachers, increasing teachers' confidence in their students. Teachers could demonstrate their confidence to their students which could lead to increasing the students' self-efficacy, furthering student achievement.

This dynamic of superior's confidence and subordinate achievement can also occur in the workplace. Figure 1 below represents the process of PE in the workplace based on the research of Eden (1992). When management has high expectations of subordinates, leadership tends to

behave in ways that support subordinate success. The subordinates experience improvements in self-efficacy and in turn produce better results. They “mobilize their internal resources, including knowledge, skills, ability, resolve, patience, and stamina, for peak performance” (Eden, 1992, p. 291). They mobilize their strengths. This in turn leads to higher opinions by self and leadership of the person’s abilities, leading to even better performance (Eden, 1992).

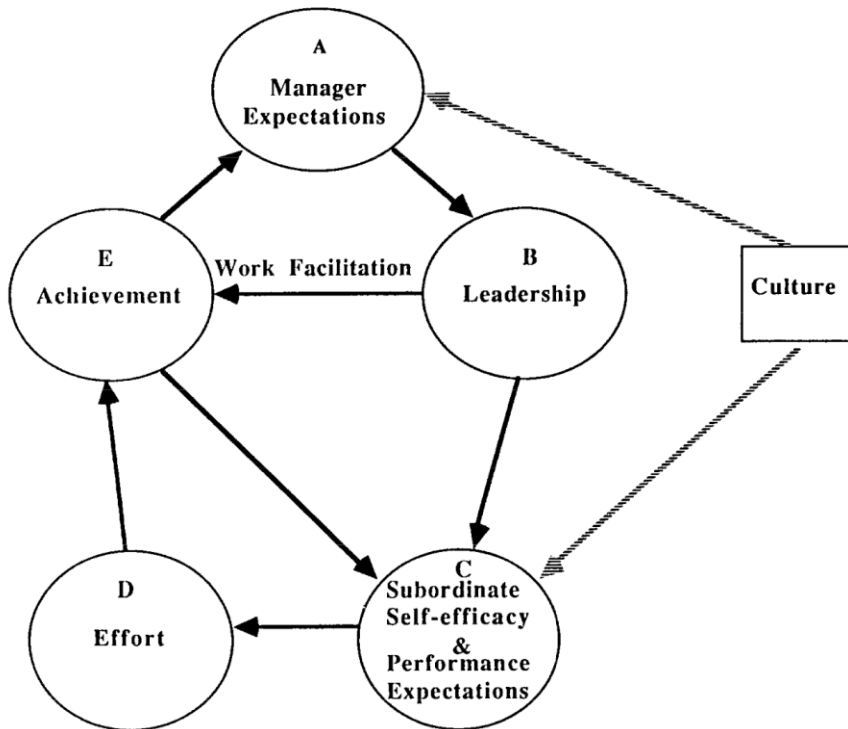


Figure 1. A Model of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy at Work

Note. From “Leadership and expectations: Pygmalion effects and other self-fulfilling prophecies in organizations,” by D. Eden, 1992, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 3(4), p. 290. Copyright Elsevier.

The PE process within an organization is shown above

I developed the below causal chain of the Pygmalion effect in the workplace from the description provided by McNatt (2000).

How the Pygmalion Effect Occurs in the Workplace

*High supervisor confidence and expectation → treating the employee well → employee expects more of self → employee tries harder → improved work results → higher confidence in employee from supervisor and employee, and the cycle continues* (based on the work of McNatt, 2000).

The negative Pygmalion effect, or “Golem effect,” where leadership has low expectations of subordinates leading to low performance is hypothesized and seems to make theoretical sense, but for ethical reasons has been little studied. For PE to be effective and positive, Eden (1992) cautions that positive expectations of subordinates must be presented in the right way that boosts the subordinate’s self-efficacy and positive expectations must not be overdone. Overly high expectations can lead to failure to meet the expectations which in turn can reduce self-efficacy (Eden, 1992). Perhaps having confidence in an individual may produce better results than having high expectations. Maybe confidence does not lend itself to being overdone as easily as high expectations.

Studies have shown mixed results with respect to the power and impact of PE in the workplace. A meta-analysis of PE in management contexts by McNatt (2000) found that interventions designed to produce a positive Pygmalion effect can have significant results in improving performance. But the effect’s magnitude varies a lot due to differences in gender, supervisor prior expectations of the person, military versus non-military contexts, and other factors such as training (McNatt, 2020). Positive expectations by a supervisor tend to have more positive impact on performance amongst men than women, when subordinates initially perform poorly, and/or in the context of the military. It has been suggested that the stronger results of PE in the military may be due to few studies being done outside the military (McNatt, 2000). More

research is called for.

### **Engaging the Whole System**

Let's look again at Lessing's motivating quote behind this paper: "*Any human anywhere will blossom in a hundred unexpected talents and capacities simply by being given the opportunity to do so.*" Mattering, PS, and PE constitute important aspects of *the opportunity to do so*. But what context can provide the best opportunity? I argue that engagement with the whole system, an entire organization, provides the best context for the comprehensive unveiling and utilization of strengths.

Effective, participatory, and intentional engagement with the whole system asks for, provides the best opportunity for, and can effectively motivate the discovery and engagement of the strengths of all stakeholders. It multiplies strengths through collaboration and co-creation. The strengths of one individual or team build upon the strengths of another creating a multiplying effect that results in a whole greater than the sum of the parts (Cooperrider, 2012). Engagement with the whole can overcome silos, pigeonholing, and marginalization to draw together all individuals to engage creatively across multiple sub-contexts and stakeholder groups. The collaborative engagement of all stakeholder groups in determining and executing major organizational priorities such as mission, vision, core values, organizational goals, and/or major initiatives can create a kind of synergy and common purpose that motivates individuals to engage their best strengths. This process can initiate and support positive transformative organizational purpose, creativity, and productivity.

Below I discuss how strengths can best be revealed and utilized through engaging all stakeholder groups using the appreciative inquiry summit (Cooperrider, 2012); through context and whole system awareness as supported by systems informed positive psychology (Kern et al.,

2020); and through engaging differences between individuals and groups by leveraging difference (Davidson, 2011).

### *Engaging all Stakeholders: Appreciative Inquiry*

“For management is, ultimately, all about elevation, alignment, and magnification of strengths” (Cooperrider, 2012, p. 116). In the fall of 2019 at the invitation of David Cooperrider I participated as a facilitator in three appreciative inquiry summits he led. Two were in Cleveland Ohio, and a third in Tampa Florida. Each were region-wide summits to engage as many stakeholders as possible in discovering individual, group, and regional strengths, and inspired by those strengths collaborate to design and plan initiatives to improve their collective lives.

It is difficult to describe the high level of energy, excitement, and sense of engagement present at each of these events. Hundreds of people representing many stakeholder groups gathered in large event spaces as equals to design positive collective futures. In Tampa we had middle school students sitting at tables with local business, government, faith community, and nonprofit leaders, artists, education, and health care representatives. All seemed engaged, animated, and passionate, the young students were impressively proactive and creative. At each summit everyone worked together to develop ideas, design prototypes, and create execution plans. Roles were assigned and dates set for realizing initiatives created by participants. These events were buzzing with interaction, creativity, ingenuity, and collective purpose, the focus shifting from clear instructions given from the stage to groups of 8 to 10 buzzing around their table. These teams worked as a whole or in groups of 2 to 4 discussing, gesturing, drawing, discovering strengths and developing ideas. Groups presented initial goals and strategies to other groups to get feedback and share resources. The space was busy with flip charts, post-it notes, and markers used to brainstorm and focus ideas. Pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, straws,



construction paper, and tape were used build design prototypes. Each group shared designs and plans for executing their initiative with the entire room. These included short and midterm actions and meeting dates. Dates were set for progress reports and support sessions for the entire summit. Follow through took place in the months that followed, if slowed by the pandemic.

**Appreciative Inquiry Introduction.** Coined and created by David Cooperrider

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a theory and practice that can facilitate the engagement of a whole organization in the collective uncovering of stakeholder strengths toward the realization of positive collective futures (Cooperrider, 2012). AI is an approach to organizational change that encourages appreciation of what is good about an organization. Appreciation means both valuing something and fostering its growth. When something grows it appreciates. AI uses inquiry as a discovery mechanism, seeking out what is best in a human system. This involves actively discovering the core strengths of an organization. AI seeks collective aspirations and utilizes discovered strengths in new ways to help realize those aspirations (Cooperrider et al., 2008). It does so via the AI summit by engaging the whole system.

The collaborative engagement of the whole may be an ideal context to uncover and utilize individual, group, and organizational strengths. AI can create cohesion and collective purpose leading people to feel they are a vital part of their organization, supporting motivation and creative engagement. Through AI the strengths of one person or group build upon those of others creating a multiplier effect of innovation far greater than the sum of the parts (Cooperrider, 2012). It can create a sense of ownership, buy-in and collective motivation leading to positive collective change. “True innovation happens when strong multi-disciplinary groups come together, build a collaborative and appreciative interchange, and explore the intersection of their different points of strength” (Cooperrider, 2012, p. 113).

**The AI Summit.** Imagine hundreds of people under one roof, or in a hyper-organized video conference, representing all organizational stakeholder groups, organized in teams of eight at round tables, gathered with a collective purpose to create actionable designs and specific plans around an inspiring theme. After receiving clear instruction within 30 minutes each group engages in meaningful conversation about institutional and individual strengths that are directly relevant to the summit's theme. Collective visions are developed through brainstorming and grouping of like ideas. These visions are then displayed on 4' x 8' foam core boards distributed around the perimeter. People "vote with their feet" by going to the initiative that excites them the most. New groups form around each initiative, and soon these groups develop actionable designs and plans and share them with the entire summit. Within a week of the summit each group has taken their first step toward the realization of their initiative, and the active realization of a collectively designed positive future is underway (Cooperrider, 2012; Cooperrider et al., 2008; Cosey, DeLacey, Ferguson, & McCaw, 2021; Ludema et al., 2003).

The AI summit can shift organizational focus from micro-management, working in small groups, to macro-management which goes beyond individual strengths to discover, create, and utilize combinations and configurations of strengths inherent in the whole system. It is both top-down and bottom-up, and is about connection and collaboration of what Cooperrider calls "enterprise-wide strengths" (2012, p. 106) to promote strategic opportunities where "the experience of the wholeness brings out the best in human beings—perhaps more powerfully and effectively than anything else" (Cooperrider, 2012, p. 111)

The AI summit works best if all stakeholder groups are present. The more stakeholder groups represented the more effectively the macro-management shift and the resultant utilization of new strengths configurations can occur. To engage the wisdom and buy-in of all

organizational departments and relevant outside stakeholders, representatives of each must participate. At an AI summit people work in teams that include individuals from various stakeholder groups to build collaboration across differences and silos (Ludema et al., 2003; Cooperrider, 2012).

Below I summarize Cooperrider's description of the four step AI process and five success factors for applying those steps at an AI summit. I then discuss whole system engagement proposing the native Hawaiian philosophy of ahupua'a as an analogy. Next I summarize Cooperrider's notions about the power of theory to transform and the five theoretical principles underlying AI. Finally, I touch on whole systems thinking, systems informed positive psychology, and leveraging difference to support organizational goals.

**The Four-Phase AI Process.** An AI summit involves a four stage (4-D) process: discovery, dream, design, and deploy (Ludema et al., 2003; Cooperrider et al., 2008). Prior to the 4-D process a provocative positive theme is developed characterizing the overarching goal of the summit. The goal can be anything that is strategically important. Themes should be powerful, catchy, and stretch the imagination or challenge traditional ways of thinking. Examples include passionate learning community, lightning-fast consensus, innovation from everywhere, transforming opposition into collaboration, business as a force for peace (D. L. Cooperrider, personal communication, March 20, 2018). Themes can be more narrowly targeted such as: healthy food gardens everywhere, or music education to unite people across differences. In the first phase, discovery, theme-relevant individual, team, and organizational strengths are uncovered utilizing appreciative questions. Strengths are revealed, shared, and discussed. In the second "dream" phase teams imagine a best possible collective future informed by the strengths revealed in the discovery phase. Out of the dream phase specific propositions (initiatives) are

created and new teams are formed by people joining the initiative they are most passionate about. Next begins the fun and engaging “design” phase. Each new team brainstorms how to achieve their proposition, groups like ideas, selects the best idea, and develops a prototypical design of it. This phase includes creative ways of using and combining strengths discovered in phase one. Prototypes are generated quickly to get the basic idea across. Details are developed later. Designs can take the form of a physical prototype made from cardboard, toothpicks, straws, balloons, pipe cleaners etc., or a storyboard, skit, mock interview, or newspaper article, or almost anything that expresses the essential components of the design. In the final “deploy” phase each group develops specific plans and timelines for post-summit first steps, mid-range steps, and long-term goal achievement. The designs and deployment plans are shared with the entire summit. Post-summit follow-up progress reports, meetings, and strategic adjustment allowances are planned for and carried out in the months following the summit (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Ludema et al., 2003).

The AI Summit is exhilarating and brings out the best in people and organizations. It motivates people to share their strengths and creates an environment where one feels safe and empowered to do so. It facilitates collaboration across departments, stakeholder groups, and difference serving as a catalyst to combine strengths with strengths creating a multiplying effect.

**The Five AI Summit Success Factors.** Cooperrider (2012) shares five factors important to successful AI summits. *#1: Reversing the 80/20 rule.* Focusing on the positive uplifts and grows strengths. Typically, organizations focus about 80% on what’s wrong and 20% on what’s right. If instead we spend 80% of our attention on what’s working and on strengths, that inspires innovation. *#2: Topic choice: pre-frame a big compelling focus.* A compelling summit topic motivates people to discover strengths to further it. David Cooperrider provides an example of

developing a compelling topic. British Airways was losing passengers' bags. They were motivated to fix this problem. They were told to reframe their goal away from what they don't want, lost baggage, to an aspirational statement of what they do want. Various iterations ensued, things like all bags arriving on time and on location, which was putting a positive spin on eliminating what they don't want. In time they understood and came up with the aspirational theme "outstanding arrival experiences." Stakeholder groups were then engaged in appreciative interviews regarding what constitutes "outstanding arrival experiences" and how to increase them to become the norm. It's easy to imagine that if this aspiration is achieved not only will bags not be lost, but many other positive attributes of outstanding arrivals would be implemented for passengers and crew alike (D. L. Cooperrider, personal communication, March 20, 2018). #3: *Engage the entire system (and beyond), creating unexpected new configurations* that can combine strengths in new ways, leading to previously unimagined successes. The goal is to bring all relevant stakeholder groups together. For business organizations this includes all departments as well as customers, suppliers, lenders, landlords, trade organizations, outside consultants, and more, anyone who is part of or interacts with the organization around the summit topic. It can be useful to create a stakeholder map. There are lots of possible objections to this approach including concerns customers could witness internal organizational conflicts, suppliers in competition won't work well together, information will be revealed to competitors, and the organization can't afford to have everyone occupied for one, two, or three days during the summit. Cooperrider (2012) points out that these are important considerations but engaging the whole is by far the best way to access and utilize all organizational strengths toward major organizational goals. Influences which fracture the whole function as roadblocks to the effective utilization of organizational strengths. These include worker isolation and silos, we-them

mentality, and departments keeping what they do and how they do it to themselves. It includes bureaucratic red tape, gossip and water cooler negativity, lack of cross-specialization communication, lack of shared responsibility, finger-pointing, and placing blame. Organizational negativity tends to be self-reinforcing. The AI summit overcomes these isolating influences. Everyone working together can bring out the best in an organization (Cooperrider, 2012).

This engaging of the whole system supports success factor #4, *design collaborations everywhere*. Having all stakeholders on an even playing field as thought leaders within a context of psychological safety and shared purpose fosters collaborative insight and creativity. In this context strengths can come forward and be utilized. Success factor #5, *is the concentration effect of strengths* across the entire organization. Strengths combine with strengths making weaknesses irrelevant. As Peter Drucker famously said, “The task of great leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system’s weaknesses irrelevant” (Cooperrider, 2012, p. 108). If my strengths are your weaknesses and vice-versa, if we work together wisely our weaknesses no longer limit us. Doing this collectively leads toward macro-management transformation and a culture of open innovation (Cooperrider, 2012).

The concentration effect of strengths takes place as follows. The use of inquiry reveals individual, group, and organizational strengths and explores positive possibilities. In addition a strengths and aspirations-based approach such as AI tends to generate positive emotions which have been shown to broaden and build human capacities (Fredrickson, 2009; Van Cappellen et. al., 2017). Finally, when an organization engages in the above practices deeply enough for long enough a strengths-based approach can become a systematized part of the culture and eclipse the old way of doing things. This can replace a problem focus with a strengths focus helping multiply strengths to realize collective aspirations (Cooperrider, 2012).

**The Whole System, all Stakeholders, and Ahupua'a.** The native Hawaiian philosophy of ahupua'a involves the notion that a tribe, family, or group is responsible for the care and stewardship of a pie-shaped slice of an island from the tip of the mountain top out to and including the coral reefs (J. Stanley, personal communication, June 14, 2021; Smith & Pai, 1992). This allows each group access to all resources they might need be they forest, or sea resources and helps ensure conservation. Each group is responsible for a slice of the entire ecosystem and is aware of the relationship between the different parts of that ecosystem. For this reason, people were disinclined to exploit or promote one part over another. Perhaps ahupua'a can be used as analogy to explain and support a key aspect of what the AI summit is: bringing all components of an organization together to collectively care for the whole to the benefit all. Using the ahupua'a analogy all teams become responsible for, care for, and benefit from every aspect of the organization. This is not to propose roles and specialties disappear but to advocate for a whole-system way of thinking being fused into the culture of an organization, and to suggest ahupua'a as an analogy for how an AI summit might help support this.

To flush out this analogy let's equate the Hawaiian tribe or family to a work team. The island is an analogy for an organization or a major component of it. Without necessarily changing the roles of a team each team could explore how it might take ownership of and some responsibility for each aspect of the organization. An organization can be conceptualized as having different aspects such as people, systems, and processes. Each aspect could be conceptualized as an island with its subsets being analogous to the different micro-ecosystems on an island from the tip of the mountain top to the coral reef. An organizational map could be drawn showing each department, IT, HR, marketing, accounting, sales, inventory management, etc. Each department, IT for example, could think about how it relates to and might better care

for each of the other departments. Through diagramming how all teams are connected, IT can get a better understanding of the whole organizational ecosystem, and how it interacts with and might better support all teams. The best way to do this is to bring all teams together. An AI summit could be organized for this purpose with an inspirational topic such as: *All teams together taking stewardship of the whole, developing our across-department support and inspiration network.*

**The Power of Theory.** Cooperrider & Srivastva (2017) remind us that social reality is changeable. We can change our habits of how we work together. The isolation of silos, us-them mentality, self-versus-coworkers competition, rigid organizational politics, and problem solving rather than aspiration seeking: all of this can change. Organizations can function as supportive teams where individuals feel at home, supported, and take joy in supporting others, where inspiring futures are imagined and realized. The collective understanding of this flexibility in human systems, and the collective ability to act on that understanding is part of *the opportunity to do so*. This understanding can help bring forth strengths, talents, and capacities, resulting in the collective design and realization of positive collective futures. AI is a theory and methodology organizations can use toward this end.

AI theory can help create the understanding that social reality is changeable and foster the ability to act on that understanding through five AI principles: the constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, and positive principles (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

- *The constructionist principle* espouses *words create worlds*: as soon as we begin to inquire or converse, we change reality. Hence the need for a focused and provocative topic choice for an AI summit, or to talk about and foster strengths rather than discuss weaknesses.



- *The simultaneity principle* states that as soon as we ask a question, we impact reality. The questions we ask are fateful. It is therefore important to design our inquiries to bring out the best in people and systems, for example their strengths.
- *The poetic principle* posits that there are many different perspectives on any one thing. How we understand a person or situation too is fateful. It behooves us to understand that different people have different strengths and perspectives and that there are many ways to look at any one situation.
- *The anticipatory principle*: We move in the direction of, and tend to create, that which we anticipate. Given this we would be well advised to anticipate, imagine, dream, and aspire to positive futures.
- *The positive principle* posits that the questions we ask are generative, the more positive the question the more positive the outcome. The word *appreciative* encourages us to frame questions to seek the best in ourselves and our organizations, our strengths, and using them to create positive, generative outcomes.

These principles can help us see that we have power to transform our futures. We can do this through seeking previously unimagined positive possibilities that challenge typical conceptions of what can be and through a collective passion for achieving these possibilities. We can also do this through the integrity and stability of our systems, morals, and visions. (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017). In the case of the British Airways topic, the initial idea was to solve a problem: Stop losing bags. This understandable goal is deficit-based with a likely focus on who is messing up, why are they messing up, and how to prevent that. Transforming the idea from a problem to be solved into a positive aspirational vision can instantaneously transform our mentality to excited anticipation motivating us to seek out details about *outstanding arrival*

*experiences* and develop ways of replicating them throughout the system. As Cooperrider & Srivastva summarize, “the key point is this: Instinctively, intuitively, and tacitly we all know that important ideas can, in a flash, profoundly alter the way we see ourselves, view reality, and conduct our lives.” (2017, p. 113). This is what AI does.

**The Importance of Whole System Thinking.** I want to underscore the importance of the awareness of the reality and nature of our dynamic interconnectedness and interdependence. We can use this awareness to further the uncovering and use of collective and individual strengths toward the development and actualization of positive collective futures. Systems informed positive psychology (SIPP) provides insight. SIPP calls for strategies and interventions that empower individuals, groups, organizations, and entire societies to utilize a systems understanding to co-create “previously unimagined positive futures” (Kern et al., 2020, p.714). SIPP argues that focusing on individuals or single groups in isolation is unrealistic because it does not accurately reflect the profound influences of relationships with others, groups, and systems. “Parts cannot be studied in isolation from the whole” (Kern et al., 2020, p. 707). SIPP provides a theoretical framework for understanding the nature and reality of human connectedness within human systems (Kern et al., 2020). This understanding may help foster the collaborative discovery and use of individual, group, and organizational strengths.

**Leveraging Difference.** If organizations can make it a fundamental part of their culture to discover and utilize the myriad of strengths they have in their stakeholder pools –strengths that exist because of difference- the benefits to the individual and the organization may prove remarkable (Davidson, 2011). In his book *The End of Diversity as we Know it: Why Diversity Efforts Fail, and how Leveraging Difference can Succeed*, Davidson describes the process and power of leveraging differences that support an organization’s goals. Differences that are

strategically relevant and of value are potentially wide in variety including, but not limited to race, gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, skill sets, and experience. Leveraging difference involves four components: seeing differences and how they may be strategically relevant, understanding differences and the experiences of those exhibiting a difference, engaging difference through exploring how a difference can be used to further goals, and leveraging difference by embedding the strategic use of difference in organizational culture and habits (Davidson, 2011). See the diagram below that I created based on Davidson's approach.

#### Leveraging Difference Process (Davidson, 2011)

1. **See difference:** identify strategically relevant differences  
⇒ the means by which relevant differences are identified in the organization.
2. **Understand difference:** learn about relevant differences  
⇒ learning about the nature of a relevant difference and *how people who carry that difference experience the organization.*
3. **Engage difference:** act to create business results from relevant differences  
⇒ *exploring ways that a difference can be used to enhance the organization.*
4. **Leverage difference:** systematically achieve results by continuously using differences

AI and leveraging difference seem compatible and could likely be used together to best discover and utilize individual, group, and organizational strengths. AI intentionally seeks out different strengths, endeavors to understand their value, engage them collectively to generate preferred futures, and change organizational culture to continuously do this. This mirrors the steps of leveraging difference. I think organizations have much to gain from using these two approaches in combination.

#### ***Conclusion to Engaging the Whole System***

Engagement with the entire organization provides the best opportunity for uncovering and utilizing individual, team, and system-wide strengths. This is the best context for discovering

and using individual strengths precisely because it is the best context for discovering and using team and system-wide strengths. Engaging individuals as valued members of an organization in the work of collectively uncovering the organization's strengths and developing collective visions of positive futures can enable them to reveal even more of their own strengths and teach them to use those strengths in more effective combinations with others. In this section I have attempted to demonstrate how this can occur using appreciative inquiry, specifically the AI summit. To this end I have suggested the native Hawaiian philosophy of ahupua'a as an analogy, the understanding of the power of theory and ideas including the five AI principles, understanding the importance and complexity of interconnection as embraced by SIPP, and engaging a variety of strengths through leveraging difference.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have presented a hypothesis, born of my own experience, and based on a quote by Doris Lessing, *"Any human anywhere will blossom in a hundred unexpected talents and capacities simply by being given the opportunity to do so."* The hypothesis is that people's strengths are often hidden from self, others, or both as exemplified by the Johari window, and that given the right conditions all kinds of unexpected strengths and capacities can come forth and be utilized as expressed so beautifully in the quote. These conditions include mattering, psychological safety, the Pygmalion effect, and collaborative engagement with the whole system of which appreciative inquiry is a powerful example. Engagement with the whole includes whole systems thinking and leveraging difference. These six factors are not intended to be an exhaustive list of what is necessary to fully actualize the enticing quote, but I believe they go a long way towards it. These factors also support my lived experience. In a variety of career contexts, I have witnessed the power that comes from feeling valued and having the ability to

add value. I have seen groups be motivated to discover and utilize their strengths to build positive collective futures. I've seen the blossoming of strengths in self and others through collective idea generation supported by PS and the respect and confidence of superiors. I've seen diverse groups of people (age, gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, skills, and experience) working as co-collaborators engaging strengths that come from difference while experiencing the excitement, power, and sense of commonality that comes from working with the entire system. I've seen the positive impact this can have for people, teams, and whole systems. And I am confident there is much more potential to what I have described in these pages for the blossoming of unexpected talents and capacities when people use this to knowledge to give others the opportunity to do so.

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