

The Vertigo of New Vision

Business as an Agent of World Benefit

An Interview with David Cooperrider



Introduction

Designing a new, world-shaping process for celebrating and learning from businesses that are agents of world benefit has been a dream of David Cooperrider's for some time. With the creation of that process now begun through a new crowd-sourcing challenge, [Axiom News](#) caught up with David to discuss the seed of his dream, the thinking that shapes it and his take on what this could mean for our world.

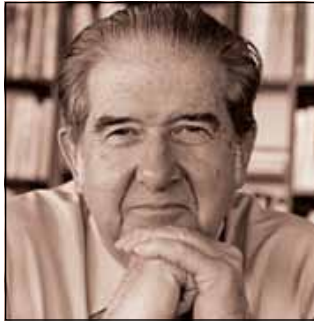
Q. How did you come to be so passionate about the idea of business as an agent of world benefit?

A. It was close to 25 years ago, yet I remember my first meeting with Willis Harman in vivid color. Fresh out of my doctoral dissertation research where I first outlined the concept and theory of Appreciative Inquiry, I was taking the next big step, exploring the possibility of a worldwide appreciative inquiry to help accelerate a new kind global learning. The sense, emerging in many quarters, was that humanity's age-old form of learning — experiential learning — had reached its limits.

For so many difficult and complex global issues we could no longer afford to learn through experience. Why? Because the consequences would be irreversible. We couldn't afford, for example, to learn from one nuclear holocaust because the effects would be irreversible in their consequence. We could not afford to learn from mass extinction of species — because extinction, while it's hard to fathom it, means forever. The list goes on, from the melting of glaciers to the meltdown of nuclear reactors. The

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lesson: much needed would be a vital call to a new kind of collective learning as a human family. How might we give birth to a new imaginative competence, the capacity for anticipatory learning in the imagination collectively, before the future unfolds. But what would be the first topic?



Willis Harman

My meeting Willis Harman in his office in 1987 was like opening the doors in the mind. We all have those precious moments — a seemingly chance encounter with people who can only be described as guiding lights — and its only much later you realize the enormity of the person’s impact and gift, not only to you, but to humankind and the life of our planet as a whole.

Willis Harman was a Stanford engineer and futurist, bringing together global systems forecasting methods with intuition and deep reflection. And he was sharing with me his early research findings, before being published. His models produced a variety of scenarios and what I remember was this: two of the scenarios were dark and dangerous — one a slow meltdown and compounding buildup of negative system dynamics, and another, an abrupt downward spiral or apocalyptic tragedy.

The only scenario that showed a positive, optimistic future was one that had a surprise variable inserted into the equation. It was a scenario that asserted that business might well emerge in the 21st century as one of the most positive, creative forces on the planet. For Harman, the engineer, the scenario was a surprise. At first he was reluctant to accept the hypothesis. But soon he was clear: the transition to a sustainable earth “is a task of historic importance” — and that the 21st century can become an unprecedented century of sustainable innovation where businesses can excel, people can thrive, and nature can flourish.

**Q. But many argue the opposite.
A magazine cover page splashed the
headline: “Will Big Business Save or
Destroy the Planet?”**

A. Yes it’s true that the whole world — financial markets, industries, differences across cultures, and freak weather patterns — everything

really, feels like it is in on edge. In that conversation with Willis Harman the seeds for a worldwide positive acceleration were planted. And for my colleagues and I the business and society urgency took flight following 9-11's terror, when the "world" and "trade" centers tragically collapsed. The call of



the time was unmistakable. How about a global scale search, a worldwide inquiry across cultures and peoples, for a new vision of a better world including the kinds of organizations and partnerships that might play a world-changing role in the precarious epochal transition? An international Appreciative Inquiry Conference was coming up. Again it was right after 9-11. We thought about canceling it. But Judy Rodgers and I said, "Let's go forward." Moments like this are times for magnified meaning-making, and for imagining great steps forward. So over 400 people came together in Baltimore to launch a new inquiry and search.

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The topic: Business as an Agent of World Benefit.

And to be very clear, the whole thing would not be an assertion but a question. “What does it look like? Where is it happening? Who are the pioneers and surprising new leaders? Can we locate the ‘golden innovations’ — stories of courage, strength, and elevated practice that are emerging and working successfully that, if further developed and applied, could vitally transform the world toward human, economic, and ecological flourishing?”

Indeed, the exciting innovations are booming. Architects are designing “green” factories that give back more clean energy to the world than they use. Entrepreneurs in high conflict zones are showing how business can be the pathway to peace. Micro-enterprise models are demonstrating how we can be the first generation in human history to eradicate extreme, grinding poverty through profitability. Companies are designing products that leave behind no waste — only “food” that becomes energy for future growth, new wealth, and products. And landmark initiatives — for example the third industrial revolution framework for a renewable energy economy — are enabling systemic transformations that represent a once-in-a-civilization opportunity. A 2011 *Leadership Excellence* article titled it “innovation’s

new frontier.” And a new volume called *Firms of Endearment* shows the business case. Virtually every industry-leading star is strategically embracing the call for sustainable value, because of the power of purpose. They are outperforming on many metrics, including stock performance, winning the hearts and minds of many by doing good and doing well.

Q. In one of your talks you outlined three things: (1) Management is a matter of world affairs, (2) that every single global issue of our day is a business opportunity for the creative innovator like those you see in Silicon Valley, and (3) it’s time to aim higher as a field. Can you explain?

A. It’s an incredible time to be alive. There is a sense of tremendous privilege.

And I can easily imagine that future generations will look back on these opening decades of the 21st century and call it, in Johanna Macy's terms, the time of The Great Turning.

How can we accelerate not a dangerous but a successful transition? One way is to lift up what we might call "turning point innovations." I can imagine thousands, even millions, of appreciative inquiry conversations.



www.oatshoes.com

For example I invite you to do an Internet search of a Dutch company called [OAT](http://www.oatshoes.com) and their "shoes that bloom." OAT is an inspiration. Not only are their shoes beautiful and sustainably produced, but also demonstrate what a flourishing economy might look like. Instead of a landfill when the shoes are worn out, they leave behind a forest. For you are instructed how to plant the shoes when they are done. And they bloom, literally, into a tree that regenerates. Young people are falling in love with them. My own children were all smiles when they opened their presents last year at Christmas. Now their friends want them too. The question is no longer about growth or no growth but good growth. Small stories like this are great because

*For the future to be
bright, it must be green.*

they are not really small. They can influence big systems as they enter our imaginations. For the future to be bright, it must be green. Remember when Toyota first announced the Prius? At almost exactly that same time can you guess what GM announced? Yes, it was the Hummer. Not good long-term business strategy, right? In many ways it was a relic of an old mindset that said, “Things like sustainability are part of our social responsibility department, an appendage to real business, not long-term strategy work.” And all of this is moving extraordinarily fast, even the hybrid will soon be eclipsed. Indeed, the CEO of Toyota went on to share an image of a next innovation — creating a car that purifies the air as it operates.

Q. David, can you share another—maybe a story most have not heard, but should?

A. Perhaps the most awe-inspiring story, for me, is Stef Wertheimer’s miracle in Tefen in the Galilee region. This massive change has produced over 300 new businesses accounting for 10 per cent of Israel’s export GNP.

But you see it is in a part of the world where we are told by the media that the conflicts are intractable. It is here that this story of hope amazes. The 300 businesses — including the outstanding schools, parks and museums surrounding them — are all based on co-existence, Arab and Jewish co-ownership, joint education, and communal living. And its not just charity or philanthropy but high performing business models. Warren Buffett recently bought one of the companies called Iscar. He said it was “the best management team he had ever seen.” When I visited Tefen (see my chapter in the book *Appreciative Intelligence*) I was moved to tears of joy when I visited the 10-year-old Grade 4 classrooms: Arab, Jewish, and Christian children laughing and singing, and watching cartoons of creative entrepreneurs creating dignified work and economic opportunity. I asked Stef — now the wealthiest person in Israel — why this oasis of hope is so unknown to most in the world. He wasn’t sure, but I was: if there were a Nobel-like Prize for Business as an Agent of World Benefit — that is, a search for the business and society innovations that promise to have the biggest impact on humankind and our world’s transition to a sustainable earth — this innovation might be my first nomination. It is one of the great success stories on the planet. But it’s not alone. When I did appreciative inquiry interviews in Sweden into their massive transition to a renewable

energy society and multi-sector public and private partnerships, I was so inspired, even by the language. The word for business in Swedish is “narings liv” and translated literally, it means the “nourishment of life.” They are on the way to showing a post-oil civilization.

Appreciative inquiry into shoes that bloom, the miracle in Tefen, and mental models that link business with sustainable value and life’s flourishing can be like this: placed in juxtaposition, the new positive patterns, visible in the texture of the actual, can take us collectively, to the edge of the unknown and beyond. Inquiry is all about openness, curiosity, creative questioning and its spirit involves what Whitehead once called “the adventure of ideas.”

And it’s not about putting a superficial sense of hope on a troubled time. Indeed hearing the stories from our own and other cultures of the “impossible becoming possible” creates a dislodgement of treasured certainties. So when we enter appreciative inquiry’s worldwide theatre we are often surprised with the ending. We are gifted, not with solid certainty, but with something even better: the vertigo of new vision.

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Axiom’s special note: *David Cooperrider and the Fowler Center for Sustainable Value at Case Western Reserve University would like to invite you to an exciting project. It is a project in collaboration with the acclaimed IDEO—one of the top design firms in the world. The invitation is found at [OpenIDEO](http://www.openideo.com) www.openideo.com.*

And David’s call to action and imagination revolves around questions like these:

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How might we create a Nobel-like Prize for “business as an agent of world benefit” that accelerates and inspires our epic transition to a world of mutual flourishing — where businesses can excel, people can thrive, and nature can flourish?

How might we design a prize at the intersection of business and society that:

- Is truly world shaping, that is, it has as much if not more positive impact than a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize and takes advantage of our exponentially connecting technologies;
- Becomes more than a celebration but a new form of anticipatory learning, surfacing the most exciting possibilities on the planet, with a rich web of solutions from which we might glimpse the patterns of a new world;
- Show us that sustainability is the starting point not the destination, and that the North Star is sustainability + flourishing — that is, the possibility that humanity and nature together will flourish on this planet forever.

To be part of this exciting effort visit www.openideo.com. Sign up is easy!

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