

Inspiring Awe and Wonder in Business

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If awe is what moves us forward, as writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell argued, then how can we use that to lift our personal lives, our businesses, our society to higher heights?

We likely all have stories about the power of natural phenomena to inspire awe, from seeing the magical shimmering of the Northern Lights to looking up to a breathtaking vista of the Rockies.

We may also have stories of the birth of a child “opening up the universe,” creating a thrilling awareness of new, yet-to-be-explored possibilities.

In one way or another, those experiences tend to be transformative.

During the Foundations and Frontiers in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) gathering in Longboat Key, Florida, David Cooperrider said he’s wrestled with the question of how to generate this sense of awe in other settings.

If awe can propel a business forward, how do you trigger a sense of wonder in that environment?

Cooperrider argues there’s nothing like a powerful question to propel a person into a state of wonder, surprise and amazement.

Questions reverberate. They affect the thinking process, the imagination process and the heart; they have an impact on action.

In his paper, “Business as an Agent of World Benefit: Awe is What Moves Us Forward,” Cooperrider writes to the potential of an AI approach amongst business leaders from all sectors of society and the globe to generate needed change.

He tells the story of the first Leaders Summit, as it was called, first held in 2004, spearheaded by then United Nations Secretary Kofi Annan.

Convening 500 CEOs, civil society executives and citizens and national leaders, the meeting was geared to accelerating innovation and solutions to the world’s biggest social and environmental issues, using AI as the guiding approach.

The questions asked are worth noting: Where are the pioneers and surprising new leaders in your organization and culture? What are your society’s best, most compelling visions of the relationship of business and sustainable society for the future we want? Can we articulate both the common ground and the higher ground, and at the same time come together to learn about and honour our special differences?

Imagine the potential of those questions for opening up new possibilities, energy, amazement and accelerating transformation in your organization.

For our part, imagining such things reminds us of the vital role Generative Journalists can play in moving organizations and society forward.

Journalists are storytellers, yes, but more clearly than any other type of storyteller, they are questioners.

How often do the questions journalists ask lead to awe, surprise, and wonder?

If they’re not asking these sorts of questions very much or none of the time, are they doing the best they can for society? Are they pulling society forward? Do they understand how they are in fact creating the future with the questions they ask?

What kinds of images of the future are their questions fostering?

Could they in fact be doing individuals, organizations and society harm with their questions?

Cooperrider also tips his hat to Frederik Polak. Polak was one of the first sociologists to highlight the power of anticipatory reality and how our images of the future can work back on us, whether for good or not.

Polak concluded it was possible to predict the rise or fall of a society based on its images of the future. He found by listening to what has been called the inner dialogue of a culture it's possible to forecast 20-25 years ahead of time where that culture will be.

Our images of the future are a first step in building that future. Questions are a powerful tool for provoking those images. What questions does your organization ask and who is asking them?

What would happen if those questions triggered a sense of awe and wonder?