The book cover features a white background with several colorful speech bubbles in shades of green, red, blue, and yellow. The title 'Conversations Worth Having' is prominently displayed in a large, bold, black sans-serif font. Below the title, the subtitle 'Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel Productive and Meaningful Engagement' is written in a smaller, black sans-serif font, enclosed within a yellow speech bubble. The authors' names, 'JACKIE STAVROS AND CHERI TORRES', are printed in a bold, black sans-serif font at the bottom. Below the authors' names, the foreword author's name, 'Foreword by David L. Cooperrider', is written in a smaller, italicized black sans-serif font. The overall design is clean and modern, with a focus on communication and engagement.

# Conversations Worth Having

Using  
Appreciative Inquiry  
to Fuel Productive  
and Meaningful  
Engagement

**JACKIE STAVROS AND CHERI TORRES**

*Foreword by David L. Cooperrider*

## Preface

*Sometimes the greatest adventure is simply a conversation.*

~Amadeus Wolfe<sup>1</sup>

Conversations lie at the heart of how we interact. We are almost always engaged in either internal dialogue or external interaction. But how often are those conversations worth having? We've heard from countless numbers of people who long for positive change in their lives, communities, organizations, and the world. They are tired of meaningless interactions and conversations about change that are negative, drag everyone down, and zap energy—and then nothing happens. They are weary of wasting time on conversations that focus on what's wrong, without producing any actionable results. They are frustrated with the destructive conversations broadcast nationally and globally that fray relationships, pit people against one another, and generate fear and hopelessness. They long for meaningful engagement that builds connection, fuels productivity, and generates positive change.

This book talks about those meaningful conversations. It tells how to have conversations that are productive while strengthening relationships and generating possibilities for a future that works for everyone. Conversations worth having energize people. They foster efficiency, fuel meaningful engagement, and generate creative possibilities. They matter because they inspire cooperative action that has a positive impact for individuals, organizations, and communities. We believe that living into our potential begins with these kinds of conversations.

As authors, both of us are long-time practitioners of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), one of the most widely used approaches for fostering positive change in individuals, groups, and organizations. Our journey into AI began in the 1990s when we met David Cooperrider, cofounder of AI. At its core, AI is about discovering the best in people, organizations, and the communities around them. AI is grounded in the notion that we create each moment, and ultimately our social systems, through conversation and shared meaning-making. Appreciative Inquiry is the inspiration of our work as well as the foundation of this book, *Conversations Worth Having*. In its pages, you will learn two simple AI practices and five powerful principles to make almost any conversation one worth having. Rather than heading down a negative path, we show you how to frame conversations in ways that make people you're talking with want to engage and take action. We guide you to ask questions that can change the direction of any

conversation, inspiring connection, new knowledge, and innovation. Principles we lay out in the book will influence how you think about your own experiences and challenges, helping you reflect on them more constructively and productively.

Each chapter is built around real-life stories drawn from our personal and client relationships that demonstrate practices and principles that were used to transform both conversations and outcomes. These include primarily applications in the business world, as well as several stories from the realms of education, community change, and family dynamics. We also share the research behind this work, because it is truly evidence-based. From our vantage point, one of the most exciting things about life is the power of a single conversation to make a significant, positive difference. We invite you to join us in creating a positive change in *your* life and work by engaging in conversations worth having.

We are especially grateful to be working with Berrett-Koehler Publishers, whose mission is *connecting people and ideas to create a world that works for all*. We hope that our contribution to their important work will help to influence positive change on the planet. We invite you to be one of many catalysts who are stimulating conversations to support a world that works for all.

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P.S. We would be grateful if you shared any of your stories with us.

## Introduction

By David L. Cooperrider

*We Live in Worlds Our Conversations Create*

*“I am struck by the simple fact that my impact as a leader, and even my whole day, goes better when I share my amazement, when we open minds, live into deeper and better questions, and interdependently emerge new things in every conversation...”*

*“Life worth living ...must be made of affirmation.”*

These are the words of one of the most remarkable chief executive officers I’ve ever worked with, arguably one of the greatest, most thoughtful, corporate leaders of modern times. In one of its classic cover stories, *Fast Company* called him the Trillion Dollar Man. The article featured Dee Hock’s leadership theory and his founding of Visa, one of the largest, most innovative, and successful organizations of the past half-century. Today, Visa has a market value of some \$400 billion and annual financial transactions approaching \$10 trillion. During Dee’s tenure as CEO, the corporation increased its profits by 10,000 percent, but more importantly it reinvented the very concept of organization itself. In many ways, it was an early prototype, not a final model, for the more fully human organization we are seeking and even seeing emerge today. The exciting story in Dee’s career is his belief in people, which he expresses this way: “The truth is that, given the right circumstances, from no more than dreams, determination, and the liberty to try, quite ordinary people consistently do extraordinary things.”<sup>ii</sup>

I had the privilege to work with Dee for more than five years. We were uniting the positive power of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with his concepts of the more fully human organization—a collaborative, intrinsically motivating system capable of liberating the human spirit without reverting to tired, old, command-and-control forms of bureaucracy. After years of working with Dee, I began to search for the core of his success. Yes, he was courageous. True, he was tireless. Right, he was an amazing learner. For example, when I visited his home he had just turned his dining room into a massive library spanning the fields of complexity science through the new biology of living systems to the humanities, including many of the classics in art, history, and literature. There were well over 8,000 titles in that “dining room” library, and each one had his underlines, exclamation points, and margin notes. His insatiable love of

learning, of course, was a signature strength. And yes, he was skilled as a CEO, with talents in global finance, negotiations, and the future of digital technologies. Yet I still could not put my finger on his mystery. What was that unique difference, that “something more,” that made all the difference and made Dee so extraordinary?

It was not until I opened this *very special and graceful book*, by Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres, that I understood the secret to that CEO’s exceptional career and success. Dee Hock had a gift: a Jeffersonian belief in “we the people” and the idea of “organization as community,” which I would summarize as this:

*Our organizational lives and the lives of others flourish or flounder, one conversation at a time.*

For Dee, the difference between success and failure in leadership was all about the art of the “conversation worth having”—precisely the kind that this book describes with such clarity and practicality. Peter Senge, commenting on how Visa was conceived and co-created through literally thousands of conversations and dozens of disciplines, said that the early days of the company “may simply be the best business example of an emerging revolution in organizing.”<sup>iii</sup> For Dee Hock, as CEO, instinctively knew that all the abstract notions of management—corporate culture, strategy formulation, organizational alignment, change management, living the brand, joint venturing, winning the customer, enabling innovation, recruiting top talent, creating atmospheres of aspiring versus fearing, improving connectivity, and scaling up excellence—were accomplished one conversation at a time, with teams, persons, and both small and large system meetings. Dee called “this abundance of interdependent diversity that was the deeper meaning.” When I look back at our years of working together, what most stands out was how Dee, when at his best, was a maestro of vital conversations—some of the greatest I’ve ever been part of. Many of them became defining moments. This experience led me to believe this:

*Every organization and every life’s destiny is a series of defining moments—moments that shape us, change us, and have a huge impact on our development and strategic choices. Our research indicates that almost all of these moments involve the power of vital and caring conversations with significant others.*

After numerous virtual conference calls and telepresence meetings with Dee (not his favorite way of conversing), I recall thinking: “I have never seen a CEO giving so much time and positive energy to each conversation, with such purity of attention, curiosity velocity, mutual

inquiry across boundaries; getting everyone engaged like a contact sport; inviting full voice; and modeling the beginner's mind with real listening. Everyone felt appreciated, honored, elevated, and heard.”

In one instance, drawing on lessons from the Visa start-up story, we were working with an organization to help its members articulate its body of beliefs, those constitution-like principles that provide the core values for years to come. My job was to apply the mindset of Appreciative Inquiry, an approach that values all voices, seeks to inspire generative theories and possibility thinking, opens our world to new possibilities, challenges assumptions of the status quo, and serves to inspire new options for better living.<sup>iv</sup> Dee called for a conversational process in which a diverse group of all relevant and affected stakeholders would meet and deliberate for three full days, every 45 days, for an entire year. This schedule provided the time for vital conversations to get at the essence of what matters. Looking back, in a world where relationships are often superficial, this process was astonishing. Because of those inspired conversations, the organization doubled in growth, doubled again, and continues to grow exponentially. So deeply held and valued were its guiding principles that, because of the power of conversations that matter, the organization had the courage to craft one final and concluding principle for the entire global system, with over 850 centers in some 150 countries. This principle stated, “Any individual or organization in this global system can do anything it wants, at any scale, and in any manner—as long as it advances our shared purpose and principles.”

This was a radical principle. It asked everyone to be a leader—to build the culture via every conversation. In effect, it told the organization's people that they needed very little traditional supervision. It eliminated the need for a large, expensive, central office hierarchy and thick books on standard operating procedures. It realized that the intrinsic motivation that comes from inspirational beliefs is much more powerful than extrinsic forces. One lesson derived from that principle is highly relevant right now:

*When you approach each vital conversation as if it could become the most important conversation you might ever have, you can create a positive legacy. How often do we think of our next conversation with this kind of alertness and high anticipation?*

Originally, the prospect of deliberating for three full days, every 45 days, for 12 months took everyone by surprise. Now, as I look back, I realize it was not the number of days that was important; it was the tough-love message Dee was sending. He was raising the bar on how we

conceive of leadership work and think about conversations. In his book that shares the Visa creation story, the word *conversation* is used 10 times more than the term *strategic planning*. Conversation is a meeting of hearts and minds. I believe this:

*When hearts and minds meet, they don't just exchange facts and create atmospheres of hope or despair: They transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new explorations of possibility. Such conversations are literally living systems, living on the edge of chaos and order—like all of life, when it is most alive, busting out all over, with pattern and coherence, but also alive with novelty and emergence.*

When you think of conversations worth having, think engagement, interweaving, cocreation, inspiration, respect, illumination, emergence, enriched relationships, trust, empathy, and bringing out the best: *think legacy*.

*We live in worlds our conversations create.*

Moreover, leadership is a tapestry of both failed and successful conversations that weave the fine threads of our cultures and relationships, budget alignments, customer communities, innovation trajectories, and best places to work into ethical environments where people can thrive and enable their individual and collective greatness to emerge. On the reverse side of the tapestry, we've also experienced conversations that have caused irreparable damage—destructive conversations. Consider marriages and partnerships where people wish they could replay history and avoid that one unfortunate and explosive conversation that caused a rupture. Consider another life-depleting form of conversation: the boss who begins every meeting by treating the world or the organization as “the-problem-to-be-solved”; where every agenda item is about threats to the business, failure rates, anger about missteps; and where the main life-depleting atmosphere left in the aftermath is fearful and toxic, some combination of disappointment and distance. And, with all of this at stake—each conversation part of a legacy—recall your schooling. Did you ever take a course on conversations? Not just any kind of conversation, but life-giving ones that serve to open your world to new possibilities, elevate greatness, and build bonds of mutual regard and positive power, not “power over” but “power *to*.”

This book, then, represents a breakthrough in the combined fields of Appreciative Inquiry and Peter Drucker-like strengths-based management, positive psychology, and design thinking. What you hold in your hands is the course you've likely never encountered in only one book but

always wanted. *Conversations Worth Having* can change your life at work, certainly. Perhaps even more significant, however, is the difference it can make in creating precious, growth-promoting moments and relationships with significant others, family members, partnerships, and community.

Why my excitement? After all, a handful of books out there today describe courageous conversations, confrontational meetings, conflict resolution, and even “ferocious conversations.” And while they, too, show how our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time, I believe this is the *first* book of its kind to take Appreciative Inquiry’s profound promise of positive leadership into legacy-creating conversations.<sup>v</sup> Imagine taking the innovation-inspired tools of design thinking, the strengths-based leadership philosophy of Peter Drucker, the science of positive psychology, and the generative power of Appreciative Inquiry for bringing out the best in people and organizations—and then making all of these accessible as the operating system, even the DNA code, inside every conversation worth having.

The possibility that every conversation can start with a positive frame and end in an even more positive way is the central idea of *Conversations Worth Having*. In pursuing this radical idea, the authors take us into the principles of AI, now being applied at places such as Apple, Johnson & Johnson, the U.S. Navy, Verizon, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, and even the United Nations. For example, instead of the metaphor that “the-world-is-a-problem-to-be-solved”—which almost automatically triggers a deficit-analytic search into breakdowns, gaps, and root causes of failure and places most of our attention on yesterday—we might consider instead an assumption that organizations are living systems, alive, embedded in “universes of strengths.” The most vital conversations, this book’s authors’ have discovered, begin in a wide-angle, valuing way—searching *the appreciable world*, which is always larger than our normal *appreciative capacity*, where the starting assumption is this:

*It is not only that we live in a universe of strengths and unlimited human imaginations, but surrounding every change situation we are part of—whether internal to the system or external to the system—there exists the strength combinations and innovation potentials, including consciousness shifts, greater than any organizational challenge or opportunity we will ever face.*

Complexity science describes the concept of “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” that can turn tiny snowballs into mountains of avalanches. We see many of those same dynamics

in conversations, right from the fateful moment when they are framed. Small beginnings can have huge consequences, especially in human systems, which often become what those in the system ask questions about most frequently, authentically, systematically, creatively, and rigorously.

So, *Conversations Worth Having* is not at all about turning a blind eye to anything. Instead, it is about something quite artistic, ever so subtle, seeing *beyond the problem* and inviting a different kind of inquiry or search that creates an empowering environment, one that has a high-strengths density and a prospective, future-forming power. You will witness this different kind of inquiry in the first two stories the authors share in chapter 1, about a large teaching hospital and a failing bank.

This book is built on the authors' relentless optimism, yet it is anything but Pollyannaish. Indeed, in this book, the authors take us into some of the hardest moments any manager, family, business, government, or community might face. *It skillfully provides exactly the right amount of theory for those who want the science of it, but mostly it's about practices you yourself can use and engaging narratives that illustrate and vivify.* The storytelling is honest, heartfelt, and real. You cannot help but reflect on your own life as the authors narrate their own and other transformations.

If you read nothing else, turn to the end of the book for the gripping account of the daughter of one of the authors: It's the true story of a mother and daughter and their response to a young father's harsh and untimely diagnosis of stage four lymphoma. The story, which moved me to tears, was written by the 13-year-old daughter, Ally. Courageous Ally teaches us how *Conversations Worth Having* is also about loving and being loved. The bottom line:

*You learn that in any time, any place, any situation, no matter what people tell you, conversations matter and that words, generative questions, and the cognitive power of love—seeing through the gift of new eyes—can change lives, relationships, and organizations.*

If you could choose only one inspiring and resource-rich book on leadership as conversation, what do you suppose it would be? For me, the answer is right here in your hands. Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres—as well as Ally and her father, Paul—have given us a gift. In business, it will strengthen relationships, because the relationship *is* the conversation. In homes and schools, it will help you see and bring out the best in your children and young people—

Excerpt from *Conversations Worth Having* by Jackie Stavros and Cheri Torres

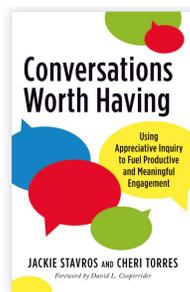
because those, too, are relationships where the conversational ecology is precious and can produce life-defining moments. And when you read this small volume through the lens of your own conversational history, it will likely resonate with something you and many others have experienced:

*Relationships come alive where there is an appreciative eye, when we take the time to see the true, the good, the better, and the possible in each other and our universe of strengths, and when we use this concentrated capacity to activate conversations that open our world to new possibilities, elevate collective genius and purpose, and build bonds of mutual regard and positive power—not “power over” but “power to.”*

In the end, Jackie and Cheri have given us the gift of hope. *Conversations Worth Having* are those that allow us to grow the most and, in the process, also contribute the most. In a world where so many conversations separate us from our vast potentials, may this book change not simply our world but also the wide world of conversation.



Distinguished University Professor, Case Western Reserve University &  
Honorary Chair, The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry,  
Champlain College, Stiller School of Business



[Pre-order the book today](#)

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## Notes

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### Preface

<sup>i</sup> Retrieved on October 29, 2017, from <https://me.me/i/sometimes-the-greatest-adventure-is-simply-a-conversation-amadeus-wolfe-4910358>.

### Introduction

<sup>ii</sup> See Dee Hock, *One From Many: Visa and the Rise of the Chaordic Organization* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005). Also see *Fast Company's The Trillion-Dollar Vision of Dee Hock*: The corporate radical who organized Visa wants to dis-organize your company, 1996. The opening quotes come from personal conversation.

<sup>iii</sup> Peter Senge, Foreword, in Hock, *One from Many*.

<sup>iv</sup> David Cooperrider, “The Gift of New Eyes: Personal Reflections on Appreciative Inquiry into Organizational,” in A. Shani et al. (eds.), *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, vol. 25 (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2017).

<sup>v</sup> In the world of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the term “positive” means not an answer but rather a question. It invites an appreciative *search* for the true, the good, the better, and the possible—literally, everything that “gives life” and those things of value worth valuing. AI is about the search for “what gives life?” to living-systems organizations, communities, industries, countries, families, networks, societies, relationships, and our global living systems when they are most alive and jointly flourishing in their inseparable and intimate interrelations. AI’s generativity lies precisely in its “inquiry inspired by life” North Star and in its starting the search not in current ideals (certainties) but in the lure of unexplored possibilities (those intimations of something more) where possibility and positive potential can be sensed in the texture of the actual—searching for our world’s life-giving best, in moments that are *extraordinary* (positive deviations) in moments that are *ordinary* (like a Van Gough seeing the essence in a teapot or other “ordinary” things), and even in high meaning-making moments often involving *tragedy* (see Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*). So, when you see the word “positive,” think not of answers but of the depth search for what gives life, in this setting and context, something beyond our current knowledge where “inquiry is the experience of mystery, that changes our lives.” Taken together, where appreciation and inquiry are wonderfully entangled, we experience knowledge that’s not inert but alive, as well as an ever-expansive inauguration of our world to new possibilities. In many ways, I’ve begun to question today whether there can even *be* inquiry where there is no appreciation, valuing, or amazement, or what the Greeks called *thaumazein*—the borderline between wonderment and admiration. This volume does a wonderful job of making the principles and practices of AI come alive, in easily applicable ways, thus empowering everyday vital conversation.