

An Overview of “Business as an Agent of World Benefit”:
An Experiment in Appreciative Inquiry, Global Learning and Positive Organizational Scholarship

David Cooperrider and Judy Rodgers
Case Western Reserve University
Weatherhead School of Management

As we step into the 21st century it cannot be business as usual---for business now exists in the context of a variety of global crises, the likes of which were unimaginable in the past. The world business community is now called to rethink old mindsets and strategies and to bring its extraordinary capacities for inventiveness and action to assist the world to foster economic and ecological development, peace, and the creation of prosperous and generous societies.

Business as an Agent of World Benefit (B.A.W.B.) is a worldwide action-research project—a “call to inquiry” where people from every culture and society are invited to participate -- which uses Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to discover organizational innovations at the intersection of business and society. Academically the project is designed to link with the United States’ Global Change Research Program and the new field of Positive Organizational Scholarship, where paramount focus is today being placed on helping the world understand and make the massive transition from the unsustainable present to a sustainable economy and ecology of organizations, societies, and cultures. The magnitude of this, what some have called *the* extraordinary challenge of our generation, will call for a re-thinking of the world economy—business essentially—which has become one of the most capacity filled forces on the planet. Obviously, today such capacity is being used for both good and ill. Our search and commitment is to elevate and expand the positive organizational scholarship opportunities of the former and to do so in ways that are rigorous, relevant, globally inclusive, and value-enriching for business and society leaders.

Convened by Case Western Reserve University and a growing network of partners such as Society for Organizational Learning (affiliated with MIT), the World Business Academy, and the University of Michigan’s Positive Organizational Scholarship movement, a project has been prototyped, creating new ways for people worldwide to share exceptional business and society stories, connect and conference online, experience each other’s talents, and articulate anew, across cultures, a 21st century vision of business as an agent of world benefit. In the first pilot phase which is now nearing its close, over 1,000 interviews were conducted, guided by questions such as: “What are the factors and forces, from the macro-economic to the organizational and personal, which heighten the capacities, potentials, and opportunities for business to be an agent of world benefit? Where are the ‘golden innovations’—the exemplars of sustainable enterprise, conscious leadership, and new designs in business and societal cooperation—that are working successfully and which, if further developed and applied, could vitally transform the world toward human, economic, and ecological well being?”

In this session David Cooperrider and Judy Rodgers trace the project’s vision, challenges, and areas of early learning and impact from the pilot. Included in this exciting overview are conversations about (1) the strengths of appreciative inquiry in relation to questions of global, trans-boundary learning; (2) stories that have already surfaced—of companies like Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Rebok, Nutrimental Foods, and the work of business leader Bobby Sager and peace building and reconciliation in Rwanda; (3) the potential of on-line inquiry and the tools being developed for communities of learning in this area. In all of this one thing is increasingly clear: that the future of human society and the natural world is intimately linked to the future of the world economy and business organizations. The 21st century can and must become a time when the dynamism of business is aligned with the global agenda for constructive change—and positive organizational scholarship is one significant avenue through which this can be advanced.