

## Accentuate the Positive

FIXING WHAT ISN'T WORKING CAN BE ARDUOUS. To do it, managers have to point out their employees' faults, which often is a nonproductive route to change. But in the last 20 years, some companies have been experimenting with the opposite approach: accentuating the positive.

In 1987, David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University, developed a new way of "thinking, acting, and being" summarized in his theory of appreciative inquiry (see Trends article on page 21 and New Guard on page 112).

According to Cooperrider, "Appreciative inquiry (AI) is about seeing what others may not see. It's about heightening our awareness of the value, strength, and potential of ourselves and others—and overcoming the limits we impose, often unconsciously, on our own capabilities." AI focuses intentionally on the positive instead of the negative. Rather than starting with problems and things that don't work, this process builds on what is possible.

AI is based on the premise that "organizations change in the direction in which they inquire." So organizations that examine only problems will keep finding problems, but organizations that appreciate what is best within their walls will discover more and more that is good.

We're approaching the 20th anniversary of this theory of human and organizational development, which has been quietly revolutionizing the practice of organizational development. As you can see from several articles in this month's issue, it has found its way into the thinking and practice of many organizations.

But, as Marcus Buckingham points out in his interview on page 26, people have trouble recognizing their strengths because they are either too harsh on themselves or too generous. The article "The Road to Self-Knowledge" on page 99 examines how to know oneself.

It all adds up to a new approach to change. As lyricist Johnny Mercer wrote for the 1944 musical *Here Come the Waves*, "You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, and don't mess with Mister In-Between."



Paula Ketter  
Managing Editor, T+D  
pketter@astd.org



## CONTACT US

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Mail: *T+D*, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043

Fax: 703.683.9591

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ASTD  
1640 King Street, Box 1443,  
Alexandria, VA 22313-2043

Vice President  
Content  
**Patricia A. Galagan**  
pgalagan@astd.org

Managing Editor  
**Paula Ketter**  
pketter@astd.org

Senior Associate Editor  
**Josephine Rossi**  
jrossi@astd.org

Associate Editor  
**Michael Laff**  
mlaff@astd.org

Creative Director  
**Alizah Epstein**

Art Director  
**Elizabeth Z. Jones**

Graphic Designer  
**Steve Fife**

Circulation Manager  
**Marnee Beck**  
mbeck@astd.org

Director of Sales & South/Midwest  
**Richa Batra**, 703.683.8127  
rbatra@astd.org

Northeast/Europe/Middle East  
Account Executive  
**Mark Stout**, 703.683.8142  
mstout@astd.org

West Coast/Canada/Asia  
Account Executive  
**Lyndsey Toto**, 703.683.8124  
ltoto@astd.org

For ad specifications, contact  
**Eric Brandt**, 703.683.8175  
ebrandt@astd.org

Customer Service/Subscriptions  
703.683.8100  
www.astd.org

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