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Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing

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Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help you create the fact. —William James.

We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark.
The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light. —Plato.

Modern management thought was born proclaiming that organizations are the triumph of the human imagination. As made and imaged, organizations are products of human imagination. As made and imagined, organizations are products of human interaction and mind rather than some blind expression of an underlying natural order (McGregor, 1960; Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Pfeffer, 1981; Gergen, 1982; Srivastva and Associates, 1983; Schein, 1985; Unger, 1987). Deceptively simple yet so entirely radical in implication, this insight is still shattering many beliefs—one of which is the longstanding conviction that bureaucracy, oligarchy, and other forms of hierarchical domination are inevitable. Today we know that this simply is not true.

Recognizing the symbolic and socially constructed nature of the human universe, we now find new legitimacy for the mounting wave of sociocognitive and sociocultural research, all of which is converging around one essential and empowering thesis: that there is little about collective action or organization development that is preprogrammed, unilaterally determined, or stimulus bound in any direct physical or material way. Seemingly immutable ideas about people and organizations are being directly challenged and transformed on an unprecedented scale. Indeed, as we move into a postmodern global society we are breaking out of our parochial perspectives and are recognizing that organizations in all societies exist in a wide array of types and species and function within a dynamic spectrum of beliefs and lifestyles. And according to the social constructionist viewpoint, the possibilities are infinite.

Interestingly, there is an important parallel to this whole area of thought that has grown out of the neurosciences and studies of cognition and mind–brain interaction. The “consciousness revolution” of the 1970s is well documented and represents, argues Nobel Laureate Roger Sperry (1988), more than a mere Zeitgeist phenomenon; it represents a profound conceptual shift to a different form of causal determinism. According to the mentalist paradigm, mind can no longer be considered the opposite of matter. Mental

phenomena, this paradigm contends, must be recognized as being at the top of the brain's "causal control hierarchy" whereby, after millennia of evolution, the mind has been given primacy over bioevolutionary (Darwinian) controls that determine what human systems are and can become. In direct contradiction to materialist and behaviorist doctrine, where everything is supposed to be governed from below upward through microdeterminist stimuli and physiochemical forces, the new mentalist view gives subjective mental phenomena a causal role in brain processing and thereby a new legitimacy in science as an autonomous explanatory construct. Future reality, in this view, is permeable, emergent, and open to the mind's causal influence; that is, reality is conditioned, reconstructed, and often profoundly created through our anticipatory images, values, plans, intentions, beliefs, and the like. Macrodeterminism or the theory of downward causation is a scheme, asserts Sperry, that idealizes ideas and ideals over chemical interactions, nerve impulse traffic and DNA. It is a brain model in which conscious, mental, and psychic forces are recognized as the crowning achievement of some 500 million years or more of evolution.

The impetus for the present contribution grows from the exciting challenge that is implicitly if not explicitly posed by the social constructionist and mentalist paradigms: that to a far greater extent than is normally acknowledged, we human beings create our own realities through symbolic and mental processes and that because of this, consciousness evolution of the future is a human option. Taking this challenge—that of a future-creating mental activism—one step further, the thesis explored in this paper is that the artful creation of positive imagery on a collective basis may well be the most prolific activity that individuals and organizations can engage in if their aim is to help bring to fruition a positive and humanly significant future. Stated more boldly a New York Times headline recently apprised the public that "Research Affirms Power of Positive Thinking" (Goleman, 1987, p. 15). Implied in the popular news release and the scholarly research that we will soon sample is the intriguing suggestion that human systems are largely heliotropic in character, meaning that they exhibit an observable and largely automatic tendency to evolve in the direction of positive anticipatory images of the future. What I will argue is that just as plants of many varieties exhibit a tendency to grow in the direction of sunlight (symbolized by the Greek god Helios), there is an analogous process going on in all human systems.

As a whole this essay is intended to serve as an invitation to broadly consider a number of questions: What is the relationship between positive imagery and positive action? More specifically, what are the common processes, pathways, or global patterns whereby mental phenomena attract or even cause those actions that bring about movement toward an ideal? Where do positive images of some unknown and neutral future come from in the first place? Could it be that organizations are in fact affirmative systems, governed and maintained by positive projections about what the organization is, how it will function, and what it might become? If so, what are the implications for management? Is it true that the central executive task in a postbureaucratic society is to nourish the appreciative soil from which affirmative projections grow, branch off, evolve, and become collective projections?

To set the stage for our discourse, the first section will begin with a general introduction to the concept of imagery. The second will look specifically at the relationship between positive imagery and positive action by reviewing recent works from diverse areas of study—medicine, cognitive psychology, cultural sociology, and athletics. While I am careful not to suggest that the studies sampled make anything close to an exhaustive case, I do submit, nevertheless, that the convergence of insight, across disciplines, represent an exciting step forward in our understandings of the intricate pathways that link mind and practice. Finally, in the third section, I will discuss how such knowledge from diverse quarters holds a thread of continuity that has broad relevance for understanding organizations. In particular, I will offer a set of eight propositions about the affirmative basis of organizing. These propositions are provided for discussion, elaboration, and active experimentation and converge around three basic conclusions: (1) Organizations are products of the affirmative mind; (2) when beset with repetitive difficulties or problems, organizations need less fixing, less problem solving, and more reaffirmation—or more precisely, more appreciation; (3) the primary executive vocation in a postbureaucratic era is to nourish the appreciative soil from which new and better guiding images grow on a collective and dynamic basis.

Imagery: An Introduction

Throughout the ages and from a diversity of perspectives, the image has been considered a powerful agent in the guidance and determination of action:

A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey it.
—Aristotle (in Sheikh, 1984, p. 5).

One of the basic theorems of the theory of image is that it is the image which in fact determines what might be called the current behavior of any organism or organization. The image acts as a field. The behavior consists in gravitating toward the most highly valued part of the world.
—Kenneth Boulding (1966, p. 155).

Mental anticipation now pulls the future into the present and reverses the direction of causality. —Erich Jantsch (1980, p. 14).

Man is a being who, being in the world, is ever ahead of himself, caught up in bringing things alive with his projection. . . . Whatever comes to light owes its presence to the fact that man has provided the overall imaginative sunlight for viewing. —Edward Murray (1986, p. 64).

To the empowering principle that people can withhold legitimacy, and thus change the world, we now add another. By deliberately changing the internal image of reality, people can change the world.
—Willis Harman (1988, p. 1).

Imagination is more important than knowledge.
—Albert Einstein (in Sheikh, 1984, p. 5).

It is clear that images are operative virtually everywhere: Soviet and U.S. diplomats create strategies on the basis of images; Theory X managers construct management structures that reflect the pictures they hold of subordinates; days or minutes before a public speech we all feel the tension or anxiety that accompanies our anticipatory viewing of the audience; we all hold self-images, images of our race, profession, nation, and cultural belief systems; and we have images of our own potential as well as the potential of others. Fundamentally, too, it can be argued that every organization, product, or innovative service first started as a wild but not idle dream and that anticipatory realities are what make collectivities click. (This is why we still experience King, Jr's "I Have a Dream" and sometimes find ourselves enlivened through the images associated with the mere mention of such figures as John F. Kennedy, Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Buddha, or Christ.)

Given the central and pervasive role of the image in relation to action, it is not surprising that research on the workings of the image has risen to be "one of the hottest topics in cognitive science" (Block, 1981, p. 1). Theorists disagree over definitions and argue whether images are direct encoding of perceptual experience (Pavid, 1971), are an artifact of the propositional structuring of reality (Pylyshyn, 1973), represent the sensory system par excellence that undergirds and constitutes virtually every area of cognitive processing, are primarily eidetic or visual (Ashen, 1977), or represent constructive or reconstructive process (Kosslyn, 1980). But in spite of the largely technical differences, Richardson (1969, pp. 2–3) seems to have provided adequate synthesis of a number of competing views in his often-quoted definition of the image as quasi-sensory, stimulus-independent representative experience: "Mental imagery refers to (1) all those quasi-sensory or quasi-perceptual experiences of which (2) we are self consciously aware and which (3) exist for us in the absence of those stimulus conditions that are known to reproduce their sensory or perceptual counterparts, and which (4) may be expected to have different consequences."

In subsequent work, Richardson (1983) retracts the fourth criterion; between 1969 and 1983 there was simply too much new evidence showing that self-initiated imagery can and often does have consequences, many of them physiological, that are indistinguishable from their genuine sensory counterparts. Merely an anticipatory image, for example, of a hostile encounter can raise one's blood pressure as much as the encounter itself. Similarly, numerous new studies now show that consciously constructed images can lead directly to such things as blood glucose increases, increased gastric acid secretion, blister formation, and changes in skin temperature and pupillary size. In an example closer to home, Richardson (1983, p. 15) suggests that "it suffices to remind the reader of what every schoolboy (or girl) knows. Clear and unmistakable physiological consequences follow from absorption in a favorite sexual fantasy." Mind and body are indeed a unified interdependent system.

Perhaps most important, as the above begins to make clear, it is the time dimension of the future—what Harry Stack Sullivan (1947) referred to as “anticipatory reality”—that acts as a prepotent force in the dynamic of all images (for a decision theory counterpart to this view, see Mitchell, Rediker, and Beach, 1986; Polak, 1973). The recognition that every social action somehow involves anticipation of the future, in the sense that it involves a reflexive look-forward-to and backward-from, has been analyzed by Alfred Schultz (1967) and Karl Weick (1976). Similarly, in Heidegger’s brilliant formulation it is our nature not only to be thrown into existence (Geworfenheit) but to always be ahead of ourselves in the world, to be engaged in the unfolding of projected realities; all action, according to Heidegger, has the nature of a project (Heidegger refers to this as Entwurf, the continuous projecting ahead of a design or a blueprint). Much like a movie projection on a screen, human systems are forever projecting ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation that brings the future powerfully into the present as a causal agent.

Recent Works on the Positive Image–Positive Action Relationship

What all this suggests, of course, is that the power of positive imagery is not just some popular illusion or wish but is arguably a key factor in every action. To illustrate the heliotropic propensity in human systems at several levels of functioning I will now turn to six areas of research as example—placebo, Pygmalion, positive emotion, internal dialogue, cultural vitality, and metacognitive competence.

Positive Imagery, Medicine, and the Placebo

The placebo response is a fascinating and complex process in which projected images, as reflected in positive belief in the efficacy of a remedy, ignite a healing response that can be every bit as powerful as conventional therapy. Though the placebo phenomenon has been controversial for some twenty years, most of the medical profession now accepts as genuine, the fact that anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of all patients will show marked physiological and emotional improvement in symptoms simply by believing they are given an effective treatment, even when that treatment is just a sugar pill or some other inert substance (Beecher, 1955; White, Tursky, and Schwartz, 1985). Numerous carefully controlled studies indicate that the placebo can provide relief of symptoms in postoperative-wound pain, seasickness, headaches, angina, asthma, obesity, blood pressure, ulcers, and many other problems. In fact, researchers are now convinced that no system of the body is exempt from the placebo effect and that it is operative in virtually every healing encounter. Even more intriguing, the placebo is sometimes even more potent than typically expected drug effects: “Consider a series of experiments with a woman suffering from severe nausea and vomiting. Nothing the doctors gave her seemed to help. Objective measurement of her gastric contractions showed a disrupted pattern consistent with the severe nausea she reported. The doctors then offered her a ‘new extremely powerful wonder drug’ which would, they said, unquestionably cure her nausea. Within twenty minutes of taking this new drug, her nausea disappeared, and the same objective gastric tests now read normal. The drug which was given was not, of course, a new drug designed to relieve nausea. It was syrup of ipecac, which is generally used to induce vomiting. In this case, the placebo effect associated with the suggestion

that the drug would relieve vomiting was powerful enough to counteract and direct an opposite pharmacological action of the drug itself” (Ornstein and Sobel, 1987, p. 79).

According to Norman Cousins, now a faculty member at the UCLA School of Medicine, and understanding of the way the placebo works may be one of the most significant developments in medicine in the twentieth century. Writing in *Human Options* (1981), Cousins suggests that beyond the central nervous system, the hormonal system, and the immune system, there are two other systems that have conventionally been overlooked but that need to be recognized as essential to the proper functioning of the human being: the healing and the belief system. Cousins (1983, p. 203) argues that the two work together: “The healing system is the way the body mobilizes all its resources to combat disease. The belief system is often the activator of the healing system.”

Using himself as a living laboratory, Cousins (1983, p. 44) has movingly described how the management of his own anticipatory reality allowed him to overcome a life-threatening illness that specialists did not believe to be reversible and then, some years later, to again apply the same mental processes in his recovery from an acute heart attack: “What were the basic ideas involved in that recovery? The newspaper accounts had made it appear that I had laughed my way out of a serious illness. Careful readers of my book, however, knew that laughter was just a metaphor. . . . Hope, faith, love, will to live, cheerfulness, humor, creativity, playfulness, confidence, great expectations—all these, I believed, had therapeutic value.”

In the end, argues Cousins, the greatest value of the placebo is that it tells us that indeed positive imagery can and often does awaken the body to its own self-healing powers. Research in many areas now confirms this view and shows that the placebo responses are neither mystical nor inconsequential and that ultimately mental and psychophysiological responses may be mediated through more than fifty different neuropeptide molecular messengers linking the endocrine, autonomic, and central nervous systems (White, Tursky, and Schwartz, 1985). While the complex mind-body pathways are far from being resolved, there is one area of clear agreement: Positive changes in anticipatory reality through suggestion and belief play a central role in all placebo responses. As Jaffe and Bresler (1980, pp. 260–261) note, the placebo “Illustrates another important therapeutic use of imagery, namely, the use of positive future images to activate positive physical changes. Imagining a positive future outcome is an important technique for countering initial negative images, beliefs, and expectations a patient may have. In essence it transforms a negative placebo effect into a positive one. . . . The power of positive suggestion plants a seed which redirects the mind—and through the mind, the body—toward a positive goal.”

Before moving on, there is one other perhaps surprising factor that adds significantly to the patient’s placebo response—the expectancy or anticipatory reality of the physician. Placebo effects are strongest, it appears, when belief in the efficacy of the treatment is shared among a group (O’Regan, 1983). This then raises a whole new set of questions concerning not only the individual but the interpersonal nature of the positive image-positive action relationship.

Pygmalion and the Positive Construction of the Other

In effect, the positive image may well be the sine qua non of human development, as we now explore in the Pygmalion dynamic. As a special case of the self-fulfilling prophesy, Pygmalion reminds us that from the moment of birth we each exist within a complex and dynamic field of images and expectations, a vast share of which are projected onto us through an omnipresent environment of others.

In the classic Pygmalion study, teachers are led to believe on the basis of “credible” information that some of their students possess exceptionally high potential while others do not. In other words, the teachers are led, on the basis of some expert opinion, to hold a positive image (PI) or expectancy of some students and a negative image (NI) or expectancy of others. Unknown to the teachers, however, is the fact that the so-called high-potential students were selected at random; in objective terms, all student groupings were equivalent in potential and are merely dubbed as high, regular, or low potential. Then, as the experiment unfolds, differences quickly emerge, not on the basis of any innate intelligence factor or some other predisposition but solely on the basis of the manipulated expectancy of the teacher. Over time, subtle changes among students evolve into clear differences as the high-PI students begin to significantly overshadow all others in actual achievement. Over the last twenty years there have been literally hundreds of empirical studies conducted on this phenomenon, attesting both to its continuing theoretical and to its practical importance (Jussim, 1986; see Rosenthal and Rubin, 1978, for an analysis of over 300 studies).

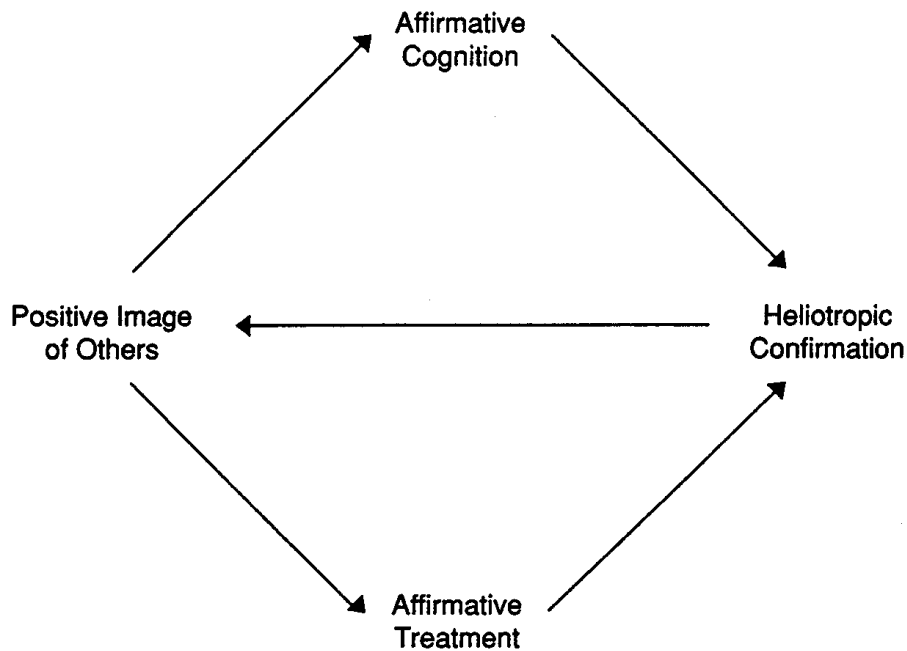
One of the remarkable things about Pygmalion is that it shows us how essentially modifiable the human self is in relation to the mental projections of others. Indeed, not only do performance levels change, but so do more deeply rooted “stable” self-conceptions (Parsons and others, 1982). Furthermore, significant Pygmalion effects have been experimentally generated in as little time as fifteen minutes (King, 1971) and have the apparent capacity to transform the course of a lifetime (Cooper and Good, 1983). (I wonder how many researchers on this subject would volunteer their own children to be part of a negatively induced expectancy grouping?) Specific to the classroom, the correlation between teacher expectation and student achievement is higher than almost any predictive IQ or achievement measure, ranging in numerous studies from correlations of .5 all the way to an almost perfect (Brophy and Good, 1974; Crano and Mellon, 1978; Hymphreys and Stubbs, 1977). Likewise, in one of the earliest organizational examinations of this phenomenon, Eden and Shani (1982) reported that some 75 percent of the variance in achievement among military trainees could be explained completely on the basis of induced positive expectation on the part of those in positions of authority.

Obviously the promise of Pygmalion as a source of human development depends more on the enactment of positive rather than negative interpersonal expectancy. But how does the positive dynamic work and why?

A summary of the three stages of the positive Pygmalion dynamic is presented in [Figure 2.1](#). In the first phase of the model, positive images of the other are formed through any

number of means—for example, stereotypes, reputation, hearsay, objective measures, early performances, and naive prediction processes. As interactions occur over time, positive images begin to take shape and consist not only of prophecies but also tend to become elaborated by one’s sense of its other possibilities as well as one’s sense of “what should be,” or normative valuations. Taken together the prophecies, possibilities, and normative valuations combine to create a broad brushstroke picture of interpersonal expectancy that has its pervasive effect through two primary mediators—expectancy-consistent cognition and expectancy-consistent treatment.

Figure 2.1.
The Positive Pygmalion Dynamic
(adapted from Jussim, 1986).



Considerable evidence, for example, indicates that a positive image of another serves as a powerful cognitive tuning device that appears to trigger in the perceiver an increased capacity to (1) perceive the successes of another (Deaux and Ernsweiler, 1974), (2) access from memory the positive rather than negative aspects of the other (Hastie and Kumar, 1979), and (3) perceive ambiguous situations for their positive rather than negative possibilities (Darley and Gross, 1983).

While often spoken about in pejorative ways as cognitive bias or distortion (“vital lies,” to use Goleman’s popular term), it is quite possible that this affirmative capacity to cognitively tune into the most positive aspects of another human being is in fact a remarkable human gift; it is not merely an aberration distorting some “given” reality but is a creative agent in the construction of reality. We see what our images make us capable of seeing. And affirmative cognition, as we will later highlight in our discussion of

positive self-monitoring, is a unique and powerful competency that owes its existence to the dynamic workings of the positive image.

The key point is that all of our cognitive capacities—perception, memory, learning—are cued and shaped by the images projected through our expectancies. We see what our imaginative horizon allows us to see. And because “seeing is believing,” our acts often take on a whole new tone and character depending on the strength, vitality, and force of a given image. The second consequence of the positive image of the other, therefore, is that it supports differential behavioral treatment in a number of systematic ways.

For example, it has been shown, both in the field and the laboratory, that teachers who hold extremely positive images of their students tend to provide those students with (1) increased emotional support in comparison to others (Rist, 1970; Rubovitz and Maehar, 1973); (2) clearer, more immediate, and more positive feedback around effort and performance (Weinstein, 1976; Cooper, 1979); and (3) better opportunities to perform and learn more challenging materials (Brophy and Good, 1974; Swann and Snyder, 1980).

Finally, in the third stage of the model, people begin to respond to the positive images that others have of them. When mediated by cognitive, affective, and motivational factors, according to Jussim (1986), heliotropic acts are initiated on the basis of increased effort, persistence, attention, participation, and cooperation, so that ultimately, high PIs often perform at levels superior to those projected with low-expectancy images. Research also shows that such effects tend to be long lasting, especially when the Pygmalion dynamic becomes institutionalized. High-PI students, for example, when assigned to the higher academic tracks, are virtually never moved to a lower track (the same is also true for negative-expectancy students, according to Brophy and Good’s 1974 review of the “near permanence” of tracking).

The greatest value of the Pygmalion research is that it begins to provide empirical understanding of the relational pathways of the positive image-positive action dynamic and of the transactional basis of the human self. To understand the self as a symbolic social creation is to recognize—as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, George Simmel, Lev Vygotsky, Martin Buber, and many others have argued—that human beings are essentially modifiable, are open to new development, and are products of the human imagination and mind. We are each made and imagined in the eyes of one another. There is an utter inseparability of the individual from the social context and history of the projective process. And positive interpersonal imagery, the research now shows, accomplishes its work very concretely. Like the placebo response discussed earlier, it appears that the positive image plants a seed that redirects the mind of the perceiver to think about and see the other with affirmative eyes.

Positive Affect and Learned Helpfulness

While often talked about in cognitive terms, one of the core features of imagery is that it integrates cognition and affect becomes a catalytic force through its sentiment-evoking

quality. In many therapies, for example, it is well established that focusing on images often elicits strong emotional reactions; whereas verbal mental processes are linear, the image provides simultaneous representation, making it possible to vicariously experience that which is held in the imagination (Sheikh and Panagiotou, 1975).

So what about the relation between positive emotion—delight, compassion, joy, love, happiness, passion, and so on—and positive action? To what extent is it the affective side of the positive image that generates and sustains heliotropic movement so often seen in human systems? While still in the formative stages, early results on this issue are making clear that there is indeed a unique psychophysiology of positive emotion (as Norman Cousins has argued) and that individually as well as collectively, positive emotion may well be the pivotal factor determining the heliotropic potential of images of the future.

This line of research is partly predicated on knowledge growing out of studies of negative affectivity. In one of the most hotly pursued lines of research of the last decade, investigators are now convinced of the reciprocal connections between high negative affectivity and (1) experiences of life stress; (2) deficiency cognition; (3) the phenomenon of “learned helplessness”; (4) the development of depression; (5) the breakdown of social bonds; and (6) the triggering of possible physiological responses like the depletion of brain catecholamine, the release of corticosteroids, the suppression of immune functioning, and ultimately the development of disease (Watson and Clark, 1984; Seligman, 1975; Brewin, 1985; Peterson and Seligman, 1984; Beck, 1967; Schultz, 1984; Ley and Freeman, 1984). [Table 2.1](#), for example, illustrates the linkage between negative affect and disease. In spite of diversity of subjects, methods, and measures, a salient pattern emerges: A host of diseases, especially various forms of cancer, are associated with chronic and persistent negative images, expressed and embodied in feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. As one physician from Yale concludes, “cancer is despair experienced at the cellular level” (Siegel, 1986).

Table 2.1.
The Relationship Between Negative Affect and Disease:
Conclusions from 28 Papers on Affect and Disease
(adapted from Ley and Freeman, 1984, p. 57).

| Disease | Affective State |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Cancer | Depression |
| Cancer | Loss of hope |
| Leukemia | Depression, anxiety |
| Leukemia | Loss of significant |

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| | other |
| Neoplasm | Hopelessness, despair |
| Cancer | Self-directed aggression |
| Cancer | Depression |
| Cancer | Hopelessness |
| Cancer | Hopelessness |
| Cancer | Depression, hostility |
| Lung cancer | Rigidity, repression, hostility, despair |
| Cancer | Decreased depression |
| Cancer | Lethargy, depression |
| Cancer | Affective disorder |
| Cancer | Affective disorder |
| Cancer | Affective disorder |
| Cancer | Repression of anger |
| 'Physical illness' | Depression |
| Pernicious anemia | Depression |
| Hay fever | Helplessness |
| Asthma | Helplessness |
| Tuberculosis | Poor coping with stress |
| Coronary heart disease | High and frustrated aspiration |
| Coronary bypass, mortality | Hopelessness, depression |
| Psychosomatic illness | Hostility, depression, frustration, anxiety, helplessness |
| Various illnesses | Helplessness, hopelessness |

Probably the one finding that emerges most conclusively on the other side of the ledger is that while negative affectivity is notably linked to the phenomenon of learned helplessness, positive affect is intimately connected with social helpfulness. Somehow positive affect draws us out of ourselves, pulls us away from self-oriented preoccupation, enlarges our focus on the potential good in the world, increases feelings of solidarity with others, and propels us to act in more altruistic and prosocial ways (see Brief and Motowildo, 1986, for a review of altruism and its implications for management).

According to the work of Alice Isen and her colleagues, mood, cognition, and action form an inseparable triad and tend to create feedback loops of amplifying intensity. Positive affect, the evidence indicates, generates superior recall or access to pleasant memories (Isen, Shalke, Clark, and Karp, 1978); helps create a heightened sense of optimism toward the future (Isen and Shalke, 1982); cues a person to think about positive things (Rosenhan, Salovey, and Hargis, 1981); and, as a result, predisposes people toward acts that would likely support continued positive affect, like the prosocial action of helping others (Cunningham, Steinberg, and Grev, 1980; Isen and Levin, 1972; Isen, Shalke, Clark and Karp, 1978). In addition, positive affect has been associated with (1) increased capacity for creative problems solving (Isen, 1984); (2) more effective decision making and judgment (Isen and Means, 1983); (3) optimism and increased learning capacity—in particular, a sharpened capacity for perceiving and understanding mood-congruent or positive things (Bower, 1981; Clark and Isen, 1982).

In perhaps the most intriguing extension of this line of thought, Harvard's David McClelland has hypothesized a reinforcing set of dynamics between positive imagery, positive affect, prosocial action, and improved immune functioning. McClelland has even gone so far as to argue that merely watching an altruistic act would be good for the observer. He may be right.

For example, in one of McClelland's experiments, students were shown a film of Mother Theresa, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, attending to the sick and dying poor in Calcutta. During the film, measures were taken of the student's immune functioning as defined by increases in salivary immunoglobulin A (IgA—a measure of defense against respiratory infection and viral disease). In all cases, it was found that IgA concentrations immediately increased during the film and for some observers remained elevated for a period of up to one hour afterward.

It should be emphasized that these findings are controversial and that we are clearly in our infancy when it comes to really understanding the role of positive emotion as it relates to individual and collective well-being. The most important fact, however, is that studies like these are even being done at all. They represent a vital shift in research attention across a whole series of disciplines and reflect a change in the mood and spirit of our times. For example, as Brendan O'Regan (1983, p. 3) observes in relation to the field of psychoneuroimmunology, "We will no longer be focused on only the reduction of

symptoms or the removal of something negative, and instead begin to understand health and well-being as the presence of something positive. It [the focus on the psychophysiology of positive emotion] may well be the first step in the development of what might be called an affirmative science . . . a science for humankind.”

The Off-Balance Internal Dialogue

One of the more fascinating refinements of the notion of positive imagery comes from Robert Schwartz’s development of a cognitive ethology: the study within human systems of the content, function, and structure of the internal dialogue. Here the image is conceptualized as self-talk. Traced back to Plato and Socrates, cognition is seen as discourse that the mind carries on with itself. As in James’s stream of consciousness, it is argued that all human systems exhibit a continuing “cinematographic-show of visual imagery” (Ryle, 1949) or an ongoing “inner newsreel” (Becker, 1971) that is best understood in the notion of inner dialogue.

The inner dialogue of any system—individual, group, organization, society—can be understood, argues Schwartz (1986), by categorizing its contents at the highest level of abstraction with respect to its functional role in achieving a specified aim. It is illustrated, for example, from a study of stressful medical procedure, that people may have thoughts that either impede the aim of the clinical intervention (“the catheter might break and stick in my heart”—negative image) or conversely may facilitate the goals of the care (“this procedure may save my life”—positive image). Hence, the inner dialogue functions as an inner dialectic between positive and negative adaptive statements, and one’s guiding imagery is presumably an outcome of such an inner dialectic.

A whole series of recent studies have looked at this process, and results suggest a clear and definitive pattern of difference in the cognitive ecology of “functional” (healthy) versus “dysfunctional” (unhealthy) groups.

[Table 2.2](#) presents data showing the ratios of positive to negative image statements for functional and dysfunctional groups across a series of seven independent studies. In all cases, there is a definite imbalance in the direction of positive imagery for those identified as more psychologically or socially functional. As can be seen, the functional groups are characterized by approximately a 1.7 : 1 ratio of positive to negative images. Mildly dysfunctional groups (“high” dysfunction was not studied) demonstrate equal frequencies, a balanced 1 : 1 internal dialogue.

Table 2.2.
Ratios of Positive and Negative Thoughts for Functional and Dysfunctional Groups
Across Seven Independent Studies
(reported in Schwartz, 1986).

| Focus of Study | Cognitive Assessment | Functional M | | Dysfunctional M | |
|----------------|----------------------|--------------|----------|-----------------|----------|
| | | Positive | Negative | Positive | Negative |
| | | Ratio | | Ratio | |

Assertiveness

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|------|------|-------|------|------|-------|
| 1. High vs. low | Inventory/ASST[a] | 57.0 | 33.0 | 1.7:1 | 48.0 | 51.0 | 1:1.1 |
| 2. High vs. low | Inventory/ASST | 59.0 | 35.0 | 1.7:1 | 48.0 | 51.0 | 1:1.1 |
| 3. High vs. low | Inventory/ASST-R[b] | 41.8 | 35.8 | 1.8:1 | 38.0 | 33.2 | 1.1:1 |

Social Anxiety

| | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|------|------|-------|------|------|-------|
| 4. High vs. low Sample 2: Females & males combines | Inventory/SISST[c] | 54.9 | 33.0 | 1.7:1 | 42.7 | 47.3 | 1:1.1 |
| 5. High vs. low socially anxious | Production/thought stening[d] | 1.6 | 1.2 | 1.3:1 | 1.5 | 2.0 | 1:1.3 |

Test Anxiety

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|------|-----|------|------|-------|
| 6. High vs. low test anxious | Production/talking aloud | 67.3 | 32.0 | 2.1 | 45.0 | 61.3 | 1:1.4 |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|------|-----|------|------|-------|

Self-esteem

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----|-----|--------|-----|--------|-------|
| 7. High vs. low self-esteem | Production/though sampling | 2.4 | 1.5 | 1.6:1 | 2.3 | 2.0 | 1.2:1 |
| | mean ratio | | | 1.70:1 | | 1:1.14 | |

[a]Assertiveness Self-Statement Test.

[b]ASST-Revised generalizes to a broader range of assertive situations.

[c]Social Interaction Self-Statement Test.

[d]Scores averaged across high and low anonymity conditions.

Obviously, the sheer quantification of cognition has certain weaknesses. For one thing, it is clear that just one idea or image can transform the entire gestalt of a thousand others. But the findings do have meaning, especially when linked to other studies showing that images of hope or hopelessness can affect the body's innate healing system, its immune functioning, and other neurochemical processes. Especially disturbing are reports indicating that many of our children today are growing up in family settings where as much as 90 percent of the home's internal dialogue is negative, that is, what not to do, how bad things are, what was done wrong, who is to blame (Fritz, 1984).

But it is not just our children. In his powerful *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk (1987) observes that the whole of postmodern society is living within an internal dialogue or cognitive environment of a universal, diffuse cynicism. As a predominant mindset of the post-1960s era, Sloterdijk takes the cynic not as an exception but rather as the average social character. It is argued that at both the personal and institutional levels, throughout our society there is a widespread disturbance of vitality, a bleakening of the life feeling, a farewell to defeated idealisms, and a sense of paralyzing resentment. Sociologically, Sloterdijk contends, today's cynicism is bureaucratic and it has become the predominant way of seeing things; psychologically, the modernist

character is said to be a borderline melancholic, one who is able to keep the symptoms of depression under control and keep up appearances at both home and work. Our internal dialogue, as a society, Sloterdijk laments, has become more and more morose, and nowhere, he argues (1987, p. 12), is this better exemplified than in the halls of academia: “The scenery of the critical intelligensia is . . . populated by aggressive and depressive moralists, problematists, ‘problemholics,’ and soft rigorists whose existential stimulus is no.”

Whether one agrees with Sloterdijk or not, it is important to recognize that all human systems are conditioned by their internal dialogue. Our minds are bathed within any number of cognitive environments—family, school, church, play, and even the environments created by our research methods and problem-solving technologies—that provide cues to the ways we perceive, experience, and imagine reality.

So the question must therefore be asked, What kinds of cognitive environments maximize the “human possible”? What kinds of cognitive ecologies are we generating, and why? Can cognitive ecologies be developed, transformed, or enhanced? And what kinds of cognitive ecologies do we want?

The Positive Image as a Dynamic Force in Culture

As various scholars (for instance, Markley, 1976; Morgan, 1987) have noted, the underlying images held by a civilization or culture have an enormous influence on its fate. Ethical values such as “good” or “bad” have little force, except on an abstract level, but if those values emerge in the form of an image (for example, good = St. George, or bad = the Dragon), they suddenly become a power shaping the consciousness of masses of people (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983). Behind every culture there is a nucleus of images—the “Golden Age,” “child of God,” “Enlightenment,” “Thousand-Year Reign of Christ,” or “New Zion”—and this nucleus is able to produce countless variations around the same theme.

In his sweeping study of Western civilization, the Dutch sociologist Fred Polak (1973) argues essentially the same point concerning the heliotropic propensity of the positive image. For him (1973, p. 19), the positive image of the future is the single most important dynamic and explanatory variable for understanding cultural evolution: “Any student of the rise and fall of cultures cannot fail to be impressed by the role played in this historical succession of the future. The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures. As long as a society’s image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom. Once the image begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture does not long survive.”

For Polak, the primary question then is not how to explain the growth and decay of cultures, but how to explain the successful emergence or decay of positive images. Furthermore, he asks, how do the successive waves of optimism and pessimism or cynicism and trust regarding the images fit into the cultural framework and its

accompanying dynamics? His conclusions, among others, include:

1. Positive images emerge in contexts of “influence-optimism” (belief in an open and influenceable future) and an atmosphere that values creative imagination mixed with philosophical questioning, a rich emotional life, and freedom of speech and fantasy.
2. The force that drives the image is only part cognitive or intellectual; a much greater part is emotional, esthetic, and spiritual.
3. The potential strength of a culture could actually be measured by the intensity, energy, and belief in its images of the future.
4. The image of the future not only acts as a barometer but actively promotes cognition and choice and in effect becomes self-fulfilling because it is self-propelling.
5. When a culture’s utopian aspirations die out, the culture dies: “where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). Of special note here, anthropologists have shown that certain tribes have actually given up and allowed themselves to die when their images of the future have become too bleak. Ernest Becker (1971) notes the depopulation of Melanasia earlier in this century as well as the loss of interest by the Marquesan Islanders in having children. In the second case it appears that the islanders simply gave up when, in the face of inroads from white traders and missionaries, everything that gave them hope and a sense of value was eroded.

On this final point, Polak was intrigued with the following conclusion: Almost without exception, everything society has considered a social advance has been prefigured first in some utopian writing. For example Plato’s *Politeia* opened the way, shows Polak, for a series of projections that then, via Thomas More’s *Utopia*, had an impact on England’s domestic and foreign policy. Similarly, Harrington’s *Oceana* had immediate impact on France through the work of Abbé Sieyès, who used Harrington’s model as a framework for his *Constitution de l’An VII* (about 1789). Later, these themes were “eagerly absorbed” by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and emerged in a variety of American political institutions, not to mention the Declaration of Independence. While the word utopia has, in our society, often been a derogatory term, the historical analysis shows utopia to be, in Polak’s words (1973, p. 138) “a powerhouse”: “Scientific management, full employment, and social security were all once figments of a utopia-writer’s imagination. So were parliamentary democracy, universal suffrage, planning, and the trade union movement. The tremendous concern for child-rearing and universal education, for eugenics, and for garden cities all emanated from the utopia. The utopia stood for the emancipation of women long before the existence of the feminist movement. All the concepts concerning labor, from the length of the work week to profit sharing (and sociotechnical systems design and QWL), are found in utopia. Thanks to the utopists, the twentieth century did not catch humanity totally unprepared.”

Metacognition and Conscious Evolution of Positive Images

To the extent that the heliotropic hypothesis has some validity—that human systems have an observable tendency to macrodeterministically evolve in the direction of those “positive” images that are the brightest and boldest, most illuminating and promising—questions of volition and free agency come to the fore. Is it possible to create our own future-determining imagery? Is it possible to develop our metacognitive capacity and thereby choose between positive and negative ways of construing the world? If so, with what result? Is the quest for affirmative competence—the capacity to project and affirm an ideal image as if it is already so—a realistic aim or merely a romantic distraction? More important, is it possible to develop the affirmative competence of a large collectives, that is, of groups, organizations, or whole societies affirming a positive future together?

With the exception of the last question (there just has not been enough research here), most of the available evidence suggests quite clearly that affirmative competence can be learned, developed, and honed through experience, disciplined practice, and formal training.

Reviews on this topic, for example, are available in the areas of athletics and imagery, psychotherapy and imagery, imagery and healing, hypnosis and imagery, imagery and sexual functioning, and others related to overall metacognitive capacity (see Sheikh, 1983, for ten excellent reviews on these subjects).

In the case of athletics, as just one example, imagery techniques are fast becoming an important part of all successful training. In *Superlearning*, Ostrander (1979) discusses the mental methods used by Soviet and Eastern European athletes who have had such success in the Olympics in recent decades. Similarly, Jack Nicklaus’s book *Golf My Way* (1974) offers a compendium of mental exercises to sharpen the affirmative function. For Nicklaus there is an important distinction to be made between a negative affirmation (for example, an image that says “don’t hit it into the trees”) and a positive affirmation (for instance, “I’m going to hit it right down the middle of the fairway”). Here again we find that the whole body, just like a whole culture, responds to what the mind imagines as possible. The important lesson, according to Nicklaus, is that affirmative competence can be acquired through discipline and practice and that such competence may be every bit as important to one’s game as sheer physical capability.

Recent experimental evidence confirms this view and suggests something more: It is quite possible that the best athletes are as successful as they are because of a highly developed metacognitive capacity of differential self-monitoring. In brief, this involves being able to systematically observe and analyze successful performances (positive self-monitoring) or unsuccessful performances (negative self-monitoring) and to be able to choose between the two cognitive processes when desired. Paradoxically, while most in our culture seem to operate on the assumption that elimination of failures (negative self-monitoring) will improve performance, exactly the opposite appears to hold true, at least

when it comes to learning new tasks. In one experiment, for example, Kirschenbaum (1984) compared a set of bowlers who received lessons on the components of effective bowling to those who did not receive the lessons (controls) and to groups who followed the lessons with several weeks of positive self-monitoring or negative self-monitoring (that is, they videotaped performances, edited out the positive or negative, and then selectively reviewed the corresponding tapes with the appropriate groups). As predicted, the positive self-monitors improved significantly more than all the others, and the unskilled bowlers (average of 125 pins) who practiced positive self-monitoring improved substantially (more than 100 percent) more than all other groups. Since then, these results have been replicated with other athletic activities such as golf, and evidence repeatedly indicates that positive self-monitoring significantly enhances learning on any task and is especially potent in the context of novel or poorly mastered tasks.

Some Implications for Management: Toward a Theory of the Affirmative Organization

We are some time truly going to see our life as positive, not negative, as made up of continuous willing, not of constraints and prohibition. —Mary Parker Follett. That was a judgment of one of the great management prophets of the early 1940s who, in moving out of step with her time, prefigured virtually every new development in organizational thought and practice. Today, her ideas do not seem quite as strange as they once must have been. As we have seen in our overview of the placebo effect, Pygmalion dynamic, positive emotion, imbalanced inner dialogue, and positive self-monitoring, as well as the role of utopian imagery in the rise and fall of cultures, scholars are recognizing that the power of positive imagery is not just some popular illusion or wish but an expression of the mind's capacity for shaping reality. A theory of affirmation is emerging from many quarters. Admittedly its findings are still limited; unifying frameworks are lacking, and generalization across levels of analysis and disciplines makes for unintelligible and often confusing logic.

Nevertheless that knowledge—limited though it is—has important practical implications for organizations and management. In the rest of this discussion, I hope to push the current perspective onward by offering an exploratory set of propositions concerning what might be called the affirmative basis of organizing. When translated from the various disciplines into organizationally relevant terms, the emerging “theory of affirmation” looks something like this:

1. Organizations as made and imagined are artifacts of the affirmative mind. As understanding of organizational life requires an understanding of the dynamic of the positive image as well as the process through which isolated images become interlocked images and of how nascent affirmations become guiding affirmations. The starting point for a theory of affirmation is simply this: When it comes to understanding organizational existence from the perspective of human action, there is no better clue to a system's overall well-being than its guiding image of the future. In the last analysis, organizations exist because stakeholders who govern and maintain them carry in their minds some sort

of shared positive projection about what the organization is, how it will function, and what it might become. Although positive imagery (in the form of positive thinking, utopian visions, affirmation, and the like) has not been paraded as a central concept in organizational and management thought, it can be usefully argued that virtually every organizational act is based on some positive projection on the part of the individual or group. Organizational birth itself, to take just one example, is impossible in the absence of some affirmative projection. But positive or negative, enabling or limiting, conscious or unconscious — all action is conditioned by the fact that we live in an anticipatory world of images. These guiding images are not detailed objectives but are paintings created with a larger brush stroke. They encompass many aspects of organizational life that mission statements, corporate strategies, or plans alone do not reveal. Just as it has been observed that the rise and fall of images of the future precede or accompany the rise and fall of societies, it can be argued that as long as an organization's image is positive and flourishing, the flower of organizational life will be in full bloom.

2. No matter what its previous history is, virtually any pattern of organizational action is open to alteration and reconfiguration. Patterns of organizational action are not automatically fixed by nature in any blind microdeterminist way—whether biological, behavioral, technological, or environmental. There is no such thing as an inevitable form of organization. There are no “iron laws.” While affected by microdeterminist factors, existing regularities that are perceived are controlled by mentalist or “macro” factors exerting downward control. Just as in the Pygmalion dynamic reviewed earlier, organizations are genetically constituted socially in and through the images born in transaction among all participants. In this sense, existing regularities that are observed depend not on some dictate of nature but on the historically and contextually embedded continuities in what we might call (1) the prophetic image—expectancies and beliefs about the future; (2) the poetic image—imagined possibilities or alternatives of what might be; (3) the normative image—ideological or value-based images of what should be. When organizations continue to hold the same expectations and beliefs; when they continue to envision the same possibilities or alternatives; or when they continue to project the same conventional values, norms, or ideologies—it is under these macrodeterminist conditions that continuities in structures and practices will in fact be found.

3. To the extent that organizations' imaginative projections are the key to their current conduct, organizations are free to seek transformations in conventional practice by replacing conventional images with images of a new and better future. To a far greater extent than is normally assumed, organizational evolution is isomorphic with the mental evolution of images. In many respects, it can usefully be argued that organizations are limited primarily or even only by (1) their affirmative capacities of mind, imagination, and reason, and (2) their collective or coaffirmative capacity for developing a commanding set of shared projections among a critical segment of stakeholders.

In regard to the latter point, it can be argued further that the guiding image of the future exists deep within the internal dialogue of the organization. The image is not, therefore, either a person-centered or a position-centered phenomenon; it is a situational and

interactional tapestry that is a public “property” of the whole rather than of any single element or part. While such things as executive vision and charismatic leadership may be understood as parallels to what I am talking about, their emphasis on the “Great Man” leads them to seriously understate and miscast the complex cooperative aspect of an organization’s guiding image of the future. When it comes to collective entities like groups, organizations, or even whole societies, we must emphatically argue that the guiding image of the future does not, even metaphorically, exist within some individual or collective mass of brain. It exists in a very observable and tangible way in the living dialogue that flows through every institution, expressing itself anew at every moment.

4. Organizations are heliotropic in character in the sense that organizational actions have an observable and largely automatic tendency to evolve in the direction of positive imagery. Positive imagery and hence heliotropic movement is endemic to organizational life, which means that organizations create their own realities to a far greater extent than is normally assumed. As we have seen in the placebo, Pygmalion, and self-monitoring studies, the positive image carries out its heliotropic task by generating and provoking image-consistent affirmative cognition, image-consistent emotion, and self-validating action. Hence, it can be argued that positive images of the future generate in organizations (1) an affirmative cognitive ecology that strengthens peoples’ readiness and capacity to recall the positive aspects of the past, to selectively see the positive in the present, and to envision new potentials in the future; (2) it catalyzes an affirmative emotional climate, for example, of heightened optimism, hope, care, joy, altruism, and passion; and (3) it provokes confident and energized action (see Weick, 1983, on this third point).

Another aspect of the heliotropic hypothesis is that it predicts the following: When presented with the option, organizations will move more rapidly and effectively in the direction of affirmative imagery (moving toward the light) than in the opposite direction of negative imagery (moving against the light or toward “overpowering darkness”). Existing in a dynamic field of images, it can be argued that organizations move along the path of least resistance (Fritz, 1984) toward those images that are judged to represent the organization’s highest possibilities — those images that are the brightest, most purposeful, or most highly valued. Positive images whose prophetic, poetic, and normative aspects are congruent will show the greatest self-fulfilling potential.

5. Conscious evolution of positive imagery is a viable option for organized systems as large as global society or as small as the dyad or group. Also, the more an organization experiments with the conscious evolution of positive imagery the better it will become; there is an observable self-reinforcing, educative effect of affirmation. Affirmative competence is the key to the self-organizing system. Through both formal and informal learning processes, organizations, like individuals, can develop their metacognitive competence—the capacity to rise above the present and assess their own imaginative processes as they are operating. This enhances their ability to distinguish between the affirmative and negative ways of construing the world. The healthiest organizations will exhibit a 2 : 1 or better ratio of positive-to-negative imagery (as measured through inner dialogue), while less healthy systems will tend toward a 1 : 1 balanced ratio. Similarly, it

can usefully be argued that positively biased organizational monitoring (with selective monitoring and feedback of the positive) will contribute more to heliotropic movement than either neutral (characterized by inattention) or negative organizational monitoring (with a focus on problems or deficiencies). This effect, we would expect based on studies in athletics, will be more pronounced in situations where the affirmative projection is of a novel or complex future and where the tasks or actions required to enact the images are not yet fully tested or mastered.

The more an organization experiments with the affirmative mode, the more its affirmative and heliotropic competence will grow. This is why, in many organizations that have experimented with it, people have come to believe that organizationwide affirmation of the positive future is the single most important act that a system can engage in if its real aim is to bring to fruition a new and better future. An image that asserts that the future is worth living for will, as William James ([1895] 1956) argued, provoke those actions that help create the fact. While not every future can be created as locally envisioned, there is always a margin within which the future can be affected by positive affirmation. The size of this margin can never be known a priori. Put another way, an organization will rarely rise above the dominant images of its members and stakeholders; or as Willis Harman (1988, p. 1) hypothesizes, “perhaps the only limits to the human mind are those we believe in.”

6. To understand organizations in affirmative terms is also to understand that the greatest obstacle in the way of group and organizational well-being is the positive image, the affirmative projection that guides the group or the organization. Theorist Henry Wieman (1926, p. 286) gave a clear description of the seeming paradox involved here many years ago in his comparative analysis of Religious Experience and Scientific Method: “We are very sure that the greatest obstacle in the way of individual growth and social progress is the ideal [affirmative projection] which dominates the individual or group. The greatest instrument of achievement and improvement is the ideal, and therefore our constant failures, miseries, and wickedness are precisely due to the inadequacy of our highest ideals. Our ideals have in them all the error, all the impracticability, all the perversity and confusion that human beings that themselves erring, impractical, perverse and confused, can put into them. Our ideals are no doubt the best we have in the way of our constructions. But the best we have is pitifully inadequate. Our hope and full assurance . . . [are] that we can improve our ideals. If we could not be saved from our ideals, we would be lost indeed.”

One of the ironies of affirmation is that it partially cripples itself in order to function. By definition, to affirm means to “hold firm.” As we have seen, it is precisely the strength of affirmation, the degree of belief or faith invested, that allows the image to carry out its heliotropic task. So when our institutions are confronted with repetitive failure and amplifying cycles of distress; when time and energies are expended on such issues as compliance, discipline, obedience, motivation, and the like; or when almost every “new” surefire problem-solving technique does little but add a plethora of new problems—in every one of these cases the system is being given a clear signal of the inadequacy of its “firm” affirmative projections. To repeat, our positive images are no doubt the best we

have, but the best is often not responsive to changing needs and opportunities. The real challenge, therefore, is to discover the processes through which a system's best affirmations can be left behind and better ones developed. For if we could not be saved from our best affirmative projections, "we would be lost indeed."

7. Organizations do not need to be fixed. They need constant reaffirmation. More precisely, organizations as heliotropic systems need to be appreciated. Every new affirmative projection of the future is a consequence of an appreciative understanding of the past or the present. Up to this point we have examined the nature of the positive image-positive action relationship but have said nothing about the mental artistry by which guiding images—prophesies, possibilities, and normative values—are in fact generated. We seem to have become preoccupied with the question of "how to translate intention into reality and sustain it" (see for example Bennis and Nanus, 1985) and have ignored what is perhaps the more essential question.

An earlier set of writings (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider, 1986) described a process of knowing that was preeminently suited to the task of providing both the data and mental inspiration through which human systems can fashion new affirmative projections on a dynamic and continuous basis. It was argued that appreciative inquiry is based on a "reverence for life" and is essentially biocentric in character: It is an inquiry process that tries to apprehend the factors that give life to a living system and seeks to articulate those possibilities that can lead to a better future. More than a method or technique, the appreciative mode of inquiry was described as a means of living with, being with, and directly participating in the life of a human system in a way that compels one to inquire into the deeper life-generating essentials and potentials of organizational existence.

As this concept relates specifically to leadership, an important clue to the meaning of executive appreciation is found in Isaiah Berlin's (1980, pp. 14–15) account of Winston Churchill's leadership during England's darkest hour:

In 1940 he [Churchill] assumed an indomitable stoutness, an unsundering quality on the part of his people. . . . He idealized them with such intensity that in the end they approached his ideal and began to see themselves as he saw them: "the buoyant and imperturbable temper of Britain which I had the honour to express"—it was indeed, but he had the lion's share in creating it. So hypnotic was the force of his words, so strong his faith, that by the sheer intensity of his eloquence he bound his spell upon them until it seemed to them that he was indeed speaking what was in their hearts and minds. Doubtless it was there; but largely dormant until he had awoken it within them.

After he had spoken to them in the summer of 1940 as no one else has ever before or since, they conceived a new idea of themselves. . . . They went forward into battle transformed by his words. . . . He created a heroic mood and turned the fortunes of the Battle of Britain not by catching the [life-diminishing] mood of his surroundings but by being impervious to it, as he had been to so many of the passing shades and tones of which the life around him had been composed.

Churchill's impact and the guiding images he helped create were the result of his towering ability to cognitively dissociate all seeming impossibilities, deficiencies, and imperfections from a given situation and to see in his people and country that which had fundamental value and strength. His optimism, even in Britain's darkest moment, came not from a Pollyanna-like sense that "everything is just fine" but from a conviction that was born from what he, like few others, could actually see in his country: "Doubtless it was there; but largely dormant until he had awoken it."

In almost every respect the cognitive and perceptual process employed by Churchill, like many great executives, was that of the artist. The appreciative eye we are beginning to understand apprehends "what is" rather than "what is not" and in this represents a rigorous cognitive ability to bracket out all seeming imperfections from that which has fundamental value. For as the poet Shelly suggests, appreciation "makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world. . . . It exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful. . . . It strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare and naked sleeping beauty, which is in the spirit of its forms" (in Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987, p. 164).

But this is only part of the story: Appreciation not only draws our eye toward life, but stirs our feelings, excites our curiosity, and provides inspiration to the envisioning mind. In this sense, the ultimate generative power for the construction of new values and images is the apprehension of that which has value. Nietzsche once asked of appreciation, "Does it not praise? Does it not glorify? Does it not select? Does it not bring 'that which is appreciated' to prominence? In all this, does it not strengthen or weaken certain valuations?" (in Rader, 1973, p. 12).

No one has expressed this more effectively than the artist Vincent van Gogh, who, in a letter to his brother (in Rader, 1973, p. 10), spelled out what could actually be an entire leadership course on the relationship between appreciation and the emergence of new values:

I should like to paint a portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings, because it is in his nature. He'll be a fine man. I want to put into my picture of appreciation, the love I have for him. So I paint him as he is, as faithfully as I can. But the picture is not finished yet. To finish it, I am now the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair; I come even to use orange tones, chromes, and pale lemon-yellow. Behind the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive—and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky.

Like Churchill, van Gogh began with a stance of appreciative cognition. He viewed his friend through a loving and caring lense and focused on those qualities that "excited his preference" and kindled his imagination. The key point is that van Gogh did not merely articulate admiration for his friend: He created new values and new ways of seeing the world through the very act of valuing. And again, as Nietzsche (in Rader, 1973, p. 12) has elaborated: "valuing is creating: hear it, ye creating ones! Valuation is itself the treasure and jewel of valuating things."

In contrast to the affirmative projection that seeks certainty and control over events, the appreciative eye actually seeks uncertainty as it is thrown into the elusive and emergent nature of organizational life itself. Appreciation is creative rather than conservative precisely because it allows itself to be energized and inspired by the voice of mystery. As an active process of valuing the factors that give rise to the life-enhancing organization, appreciation has room for the vital uncertainty, the indeterminacy that is the trademark of something alive. In this sense, too, it differs from affirmation in that it is not instrumental. It does not have the capability of shaping the world closer to preexisting wants because it tends, in the end, to transform those wants into something very different from that which was originally affirmed. Executive appreciation, then, represents the capacity to rediscover in organizations what Bruner refers to as the “immensity of the commonplace” or what James Joyce terms the “epiphanies of the ordinary” (see Bruner, 1986, p. 198). Appreciation, as Churchill must have understood, is the mental strength that allows a leader to consciously peer into the life-giving present, only to find the future brilliantly interwoven into the texture of the actual.

8. The executive vocation in a postbureaucratic society is to nourish the appreciation soil from which affirmative projections grow, branch off, evolve, and become collective projections. Creating the conditions for organizationwide appreciation is the single most important measure that can be taken to ensure the conscious evolution of a valued and positive future. The “how” of appreciative inquiry is beyond the scope of this discussion. But a number of final thoughts can be offered on the organizational prerequisites of appreciation. These comments stem from the experiences with a number of systems that have actually experimented with appreciative inquiry on a collective and organizationwide basis.

First, it is clear that the appreciative process has been most spontaneous and genuine in relatively egalitarian systems—organizations committed to an ideology of inclusion, consent, and coevolution (Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1986). Put more strongly, experience suggests that the creative power of appreciation will never be realized in a world that continues to place arbitrary restrictions or constraints on speech and action. It is the realm of action, not mind, that is the preeminent basis of those creative images that have the power to guide us into a positive future.

Second, experience indicates that if pursued deeply enough, appreciative inquiry arrives at a dynamic interpersonal ideal. It arrives at knowledge that enlarges our sense of solidarity with other human beings and provides an ever-expanding universe of examples and images concerning the possibilities for a more egalitarian future.

We are infants when it comes to our understanding of appreciative processes of knowing and social construction. Yet we are beginning to see that the power of appreciation rests with its self-reinforcing and self-generative capacity. Through appreciation of organizational life, members of an organization learn to value not only the life-enhancing organization but also learn to affirm themselves. As new potentials for inquiry are revealed and experienced within the “student,” new insights are made available and shared with others in the organization. As sharing occurs, the inquiry becomes a joint

process of knowing—others are invited to explore and question their own ideals or affirmative projections. Through dialogue, new knowledge and new images of possibility are constantly being made available. And while such knowledge is always felt as an interruption in the status quo, it is valued and turned into a heliotropic project because it represents a joint creation of a world that corresponds to the jointly imagined projection of human and social possibility.

From: Srivastva, S. and Cooperrider, D. (1999), Appreciative Management and Leadership., Rev. Euclid, OH, Lakeshore Communications: 91-125