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Theme: *Change Management: Past, Present and Future*

Abstract

All development is change, but not all changes lead to development. This paper aims to redirect the focus from changing organizations to developing them and it seeks to answer the question *Why is the human factor critical in developing organizations?* The underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions are established by answering the following two questions: *What is an organization?* and *How do organizations develop?* The ontological standpoint of the paper is that organizations are living open systems created and developed by people. People in organizations are unceasingly and dynamically evolving, learning and developing. Therefore, in organizational development processes, it is essential to focus on the human factor of the organization and on the life-giving forces which energize people and foster innovations. Appreciative inquiry (AI) was chosen as the research method. This approach changes the attention from problem solving to developing organizations based on their strengths (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros 2008; Preskill and Catsambas 2006; Reed 2007; Thatchenkery and Chowdhry 2007). The life-giving forces (LGFs) of 29 organizations were determined during a four-year period of research. Data were collected and analyzed qualitatively by groups of Master's students. Altogether 319 interviews were conducted by asking 'unconditional positive questions', as suggested by Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett (2001). This paper presents the synthesis of the findings of the MA students' inquiries. The findings assert that discovering what provides joy and happiness for people in work serves as a strong basis for them to dream, design and achieve their own and their organization's destiny in the future.

Keywords

organizational development; human factor; becoming ontology and epistemology; appreciative inquiry (AI); unconditional positive question; life-giving forces (LGFs); action research (AR).

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Introduction

Traditionally, organizational change is defined as a dynamic ongoing process of moving from the current state of the organization to a potential future state. This definition of change however is not adequate in the current, uncertain and flux business environment because ‘change is no longer viewed as that something that happens every now and then and can sometimes be disruptive; it is viewed as an integral part of our working life’ (Dawson and Andriopoulos 2014: 45). All development involves some kind of change, but not all changes lead to development. There is a proliferation of theories and approaches to organizational change in the literature. Dawson and Andriopoulos (2014: 131-134) provide a comprehensive overview of 25 different change theories. Despite the growing body of empirical research and theoretical literature about change (Burke 2011), more understanding is needed of the new drivers and the new forms and processes of organizational change and development. This paper focuses on the human factor of organizational development.

The questions this paper seeks to answer and the selected research approach are presented in Fig. 1 below. The main research question of the paper is: *Why is the human factor critical in developing organizations?* In order to answer this question, first the ontological standpoint (i.e., *What is an organization?*) and then the epistemological assumption (i.e., *How do organizations develop?*) are explored.

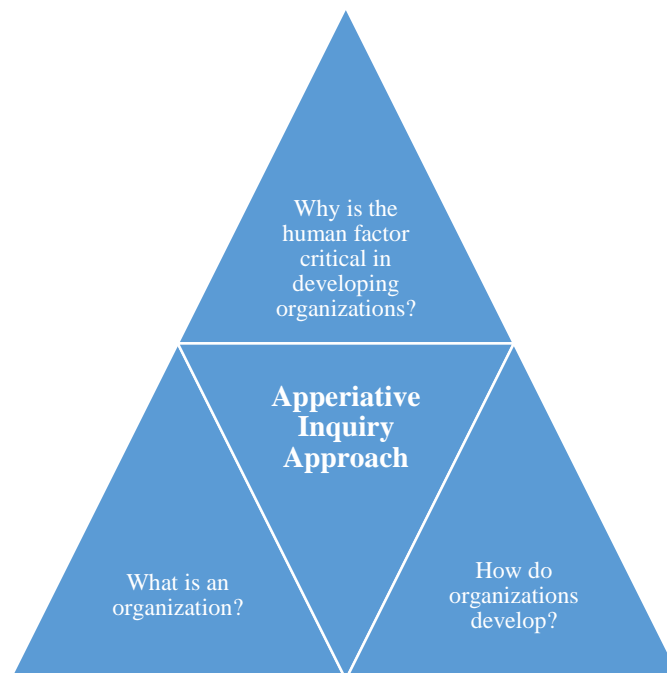


Figure 1. Research questions and approach

The selected research approach is appreciative inquiry (AI) which is a form of action research (AR). This research approach is chosen because AR is conducted with the involvement of people, it is research *with* rather than *on* people (Heron and Reason, in Reason and Bradbury (Eds.) 2007). Appreciative inquiry is appropriate because the paper seeks to shift the attention from problem solving to determining the strengths of the organizations and building on them. In appreciative inquiry, people actively participate in developing their organizations.

The paper is organized in three parts. First, the ontological and epistemological assumptions are clarified. Next, the suitability of AI as the research approach is explained, the research process is described and the findings are presented. Finally, the main research question is answered in the

discussion part of the paper in which it is argued why the human factor is critical in organizational development. Additionally, the implications and possible value contribution of this research together with its limitations are discussed, and suggestions are made for future research areas in the field of organizational development.

Ontological and epistemological standpoints

In this section, the ontological and epistemological standpoints are clarified by exploring two essential questions for this paper, namely *What is an organization?* and *How do organizations develop?*

What is an organization?

The underlying ontological assumption of this paper is that organizations are emerging, living, open systems created by people. In order to demonstrate what led to this assumption, the different paradigms, assumptions, debates, and views about organizations in the literature are briefly presented.

Currently, there is a proliferation of different paradigms about organizations. A concise synthesis of the historical evolution of organization theories is provided by Scott (1998[1981]: 107) in his layered model. His model identifies four *chronological phases* and three levels of organizational analysis. Organizations were viewed as closed-rational systems (1900-1930), closed-natural systems (1930-1960), open-rational systems (1960-1970), and open-natural systems (1970-present). Organizations were analyzed at three levels, namely, social-psychological (e.g., professional identities, values, sense making, meaning negotiation, learning), structural, and ecological levels (e.g., interactions, practices, relationships, networks, communities).

There is a debate in organization studies about the ontological status of organizations.

Organizations could be viewed in three different ways:

1. *either* objectively (Boal, Hunt, and Jaros 2003), *or*
2. *subjectively* (Stacey 2007[1993], Castells 2000[1996], Fonseca 2004[2002], Chia 2003, Heckscher and Adler 2006) *or*
3. *both* objectively *and* subjectively (Berger and Luckmann 1991[1966], Searle 1996, Morgan 1997, Wenger 2005[1998]).

Next, these three ontological views are briefly presented. Boal, Hunt, and Jaros (2003: 84-98) defend a realistic view of organizations. They refer to a story about a young man who was asked, when he returned from England if he had seen Oxford University. He said that he had seen trees, rocks, people, and buildings but he did not 'see' Oxford University. Boal, Hunt, and Jaros ask: 'Is Oxford University not real?' They argue that 'organizations, like trees, rocks, and gravity, are real' (ibid.: 84).

Today in organization studies we can sense a substantial move toward a subjective ontology. The ontological assumption of this paper about organizations concurs with this view. Based on a *subjective ontology*, an organization emerges through social interactions of people and it is a jointly constructed reality. An organization is a complex system, not a static, solid thing, not an objective or pre-given reality. It cannot be designed beforehand, as assumed by positivism. An organization is constructed by people, and therefore it could be viewed as '*patterns of relating*' (Stacey 2007[1993]: 265) of humans interacting with each other in constructing the organization. Castells (2000[1996]: 151-152) as a sociologist understands organizations as 'specific systems of means oriented to the performance of specific goals'. He argues that the new organizational forms in the information economy are based on networks: '**Networks are the fundamental stuff of which new organizations are and will be made**' (ibid.: 168, emphasis original). Similar to Castells, an interaction view of organizations is represented by Fonseca (2004[2002]: 75-80) when he argues that

‘... “the organization” is temporarily “successful” patterns of interactions that participants accept as “good enough” to be continually repeated, so becoming organizational habits. This repetition constitutes the stability of collective identity, or organizational culture, which is habitual patterns of themes organizing the experience of being together.’ (ibid.: 77)

For Chia (2003: 98-112) organization means ‘*world-making*’. He characterizes organizations as ‘the aggregative, unintended outcome of local efforts ... as “islands” of a relatively stabilized order in a sea of chaos and flux ... as temporary stabilized event clusters loosely held together by relational networks of meaning ... as products of sense making’. Heckscher and Adler (2006: 11-105) argue that communities as social organizations take three forms: *Gemeinschaft*, i.e. community in the shadow of hierarchy, *Gesellschaft*, i.e., community in the shadow of market, and a *Collaborative* form, where community itself is the dominant principle. Furthermore, they define three distinct characteristics of the new form of community (i.e., collaborative community) as (1) values based on contribution, concern, honesty, and collegiality; (2) organization as an organic division of labour coordinated by collaboration; and finally, (3) identities that are interdependent, interactive, and have social character (ibid.: 16-17).

Finally, organizations could be understood as *both* objective *and* subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1991[1966]). Social reality and social order is an ongoing human production. ‘It is produced by man (*sic*) in the course of his ongoing externalization. ... Human being must ongoingly externalize itself in activity.’ (ibid.: 69-70). Searle (1996) argues that there are ‘institutional facts’ and ‘brute facts’. The former exist only because we believe them to exist and they require human involvement (i.e., they are only facts by human agreements), whereas the latter do not require human institutions for their existence. Based on his view, organizations are institutional facts. Morgan (1997) presents eight different views of organizations: machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination. Wenger (2005[1998]: 241-262) distinguishes two views of an organization: the designed organization (i.e., institution, formal organization) and the constellation of practice (i.e., the living organization or informal organization). He argues that ‘the organization itself could be defined as the *interaction* of these two aspects’ (ibid.: 241, Italics added). However, institutionalization (i.e., formal organization) cannot make anything happen as ‘[C]ommunities of practice are the locus of “real work”’ (ibid.: 243). Communities of practice can be understood as ‘*shared histories of learning*’ (ibid: 86, Italics original), or ‘*the social fabric of learning*’ (ibid.: 251, Italics original). Communities of practice play a decisive role in the negotiation of meaning, learning, preservation and creation of knowledge, and spreading of information, and they are the home for identities.

In brief, the purpose of this part of the paper was to demonstrate the multiple views and assumptions about organizations in the literature and thus to establish the ontological assumption followed in this paper, i.e., the *subjective, becoming ontology*. In the following section, the focus is on clarifying the epistemological standpoint of this paper.

How do organizations develop?

All development is change, but not all changes lead to development. In today’s dynamic and unpredictable business environment the sources of competitive advantage of businesses changed from land, labour, and capital to knowledge and learning. In the knowledge and learning economy, only organizations that are able to learn quickly and innovate fast could create and sustain their competitiveness. It is argued here that *people* who are able to learn and develop the learning environment in their organizations will enable their organizations to learn and develop. Thus, if organizational learning depends on the learning ability of their people, it makes the human factor critical in organizational development.

There is a debate in the literature about organizational learning and learning organizations. The question is: ‘*Can organizations learn?*’ Viewing organizations merely as pre-given contexts (i.e., buildings, rooms, computers, and so on) most probably will lead to the conclusion that organizations are not able to learn. As clarified in the previous section, this paper concurs with the view of organizations as a collection of individuals and this could lead to the answer that organizations are able to learn only through actions and experience of individuals (Argyris and Schön 1978; Mumford 1994; Belasco 1998). In accordance with this subjective becoming ontological standpoint, organizations can be viewed not as pre-given objective contexts but rather as living, organic, open, and complex systems that are the results of human interactions, results of sense making and learning processes that are in constant change. Therefore, similar to Örténblad (2002; 2005), the answer to the above question is: ‘*Of course organizations can learn!*’

The literature of learning and organizational learning is more mature than the emerging literature of learning organizations. The four main paradigms of learning theories are behavioural, cognitive, constructivist, and social learning. Nowadays there is a move from individual learning toward social learning, where the goal of learning is not only to change the behaviour, thinking, and feelings of individuals, or developing the individuals, but to have an impact on the environment including the organization as well. Social learning is learning by participating, acting, doing, communicating, collaborating, networking, and creating practices together (e.g., apprenticeship). Briefly, this view of learning is both individual and social and both theoretical and practical, where the role of communities and networks is important. The main authors representing this view are Bandura, Lave and Wenger, Vygotsky, Engeström, Hakkarainen, Mezirow, Davis and Luthans, and others. Knowledge in social learning is viewed in a multiple way (i.e., extended epistemology), where it is seen not only as an asset, not only as prior existing knowledge, not only as an individual knowledge, but it is viewed as *both* explicit and implicit knowledge, as *both* existing and new knowledge, as *both* individual and social knowledge that emerges through interactions with social and non-social environments.

Concurring with the subjective becoming ontological assumption about organizations, it is argued that organizational development depends on the ability of the people in the organization to learn. If organizations are created and continuously co-created by people, it therefore follows that organizations are in a state of constant becoming. Since it is assumed here that organizations are perceived not as pre-given objective contexts but rather as living, organic, open, and complex systems that are the results of human interactions, results of sense making and learning processes that are in constant flux, it is therefore logical that the epistemological assumption of this paper is the *extended* and *becoming epistemology*. Becoming epistemology (Jakubik 2011: 392)

- is an evolutionary, transformative, iterative, interactive, dynamic, dialectic, and social process;
- unites pragmatic and theoretical, empirical and rational, direct and indirect knowing in synthesis (i.e., phronesis);
- is where new knowledge and knowing become to be through interlinked ontological and epistemic chains of situational justification of goals, beliefs, values, skills (i.e. learning happens in multiple ways through extended epistemology); and
- unites subject and object of knowledge, which are both changing as a result of interactions. Individual and social identities and knowledge are emerging at the same time.

Summing up, this paper assumes that *extended, becoming epistemology* is the way organizations develop through learning. The learning ability of organizations means that the organization has the capacity to act (i.e., react to external impulses), make plans and choices, build models to operate in a new way, make sense of the changes in its environment, and have an impact on its social and non-social environment. The learning ability of organizations is important, as it is assumed that a higher ability to learn has a positive impact on performance because it enables the organization to better

and faster act due to substantial and relevant knowledge and shared understanding. The learning ability of organizations depends on several factors, such as the external and internal operational environment: the social (i.e., partners, networks, competitors), cultural, legal, political, economic, ecological, geographic environment, and it could depend on its own history, values, vision, strategy, policies, culture, learning climate, learning structure, internal resources, structure (formal and informal), power, management and colleagues working for the organization. However, the learning and development ability of an organization most importantly depends on the human factor. Next, the research approach, process and the findings are presented.

Research approach and findings

The research approach, as shown in Fig. 1, is appreciative inquiry (AI). This is a constructive mode of action research (AR) that ‘moves beyond the limitations of the critical effort to discover, understand and foster social and organizational innovations through language’ (Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett 2001). Ludema et al. (2001: 191) argue that AI is ‘more than a technique, appreciative inquiry is a way of organizational life – an intentional posture of continuous discovery, search and inquiry into conceptions of life, joy, beauty, excellence, innovation and freedom’. Appreciative inquiry is a positive form of AR; it formulates and asks unconditional positive questions and it has a positive impact on constructing the social reality of organizations.

Furthermore, according to Ludema et al. (2001: 197-198) appreciative inquiry:

- redirects the attention and discourses in organizations from problems to energizing possibilities through empowering stories, metaphors, dreams, wishes (Ludema, Wilmot and Srivastva 1997);
- discovers what is positive, healthy and successful in organizational life;
- is a collaborative effort, type of action research;
- strengthens the community by collaborating during the inquiry;
- enriches understanding, deepens respect and establishes strong relationships through collaborative sense making;
- asks unconditional positive questions;
- leads to multiple ways of knowing (i.e., extended epistemology);
- supports open and productive dialogues;
- creates and reinforces learning communities;
- promotes democracy, egalitarian relationships;
- enhances collaborative competence; and finally, AI
- helps people in organizations to co-create the worlds and realities they are working in.

The discovery, dream, design, and destiny phases of appreciative inquiry are presented in Fig. 2 below. The affirmative topic here is the human factor of organizational development.

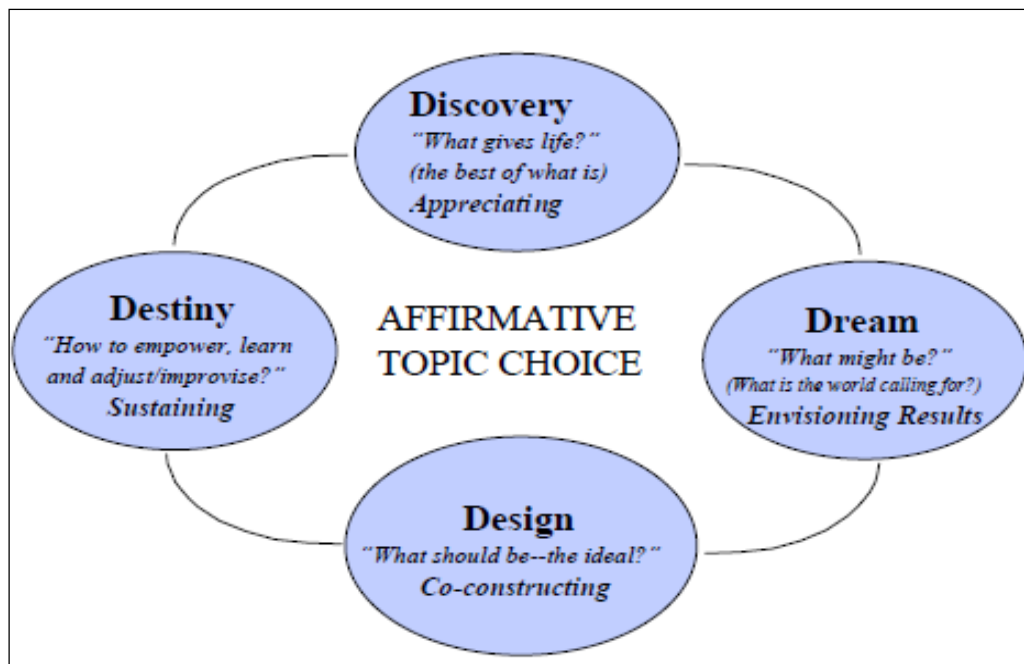


Figure 2. Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle

The 4-D cycle above can be applied and adapted to almost any situation to address issues of interest within a firm. Its foundations are based on the AI assumption that organizations are highly generative and constantly evolving, growing and building up their own future in order to move towards renewal and positive organizational change. This research approach fits well the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this paper, and it is appropriate for this research because the aim of this paper is to understand the critical role of the human factor in organizational development. This approach concurs with Cooperrider and Godwin (2010: 8-10) who explain that organizational development arises from the values of spirit of inquiry, collaborative design of the future, and from the positive view of the human beings. This view is in line with the new wave of organizational development that is called Innovation-inspired Positive Organization Development (IPOD). It considers AI as a strength-based management and as a positive psychology (Cooperrider and Godwin 2010: 12-13).

Positive experiences of people in organizations are called life-giving forces (LGFs) of organizations that enable value creation. Moving toward positive thinking in organizational development is required as the problem-oriented view in organizational practices and in organizational research has several negative impacts on communities and on the production of generative knowledge and innovations. Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett (2001) argue that there is a need for a new way of thinking and asking 'unconditional positive questions', because 'scientific vocabularies of deficit establish the very conditions they seek to eliminate' (ibid: 191). Similarly, Gergen (1994 a and b) sees several negative consequences of the critical social and organizational science approach. He argues that it:

- limits the argumentations and conversations because of the strong dichotomy in thinking;
- limits innovations and 'out-of-box-thinking';
- silences other, marginal voices;
- destroys relationships;
- polarizes, splits, erodes communities;
- supports patterns of organizational hierarchy;
- limits individual potential;
- diminishes organizational capacity, moral, and job satisfaction;

- contributes to cultural and organizational enfeeblement.

In order to overcome these negative consequences, positive organizational studies and positive leadership (e.g., Cameron, Dutton and Quinn (Eds.) 2003; Dutton and Ragins (Eds.) 2007; Cameron 2003 and 2008) focus on the life-giving forces, values, best practices, and good experiences of people in organizations. Appreciative inquiry looks at the strengths of the organization and builds on them (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros 2008; Preskill and Catsambas 2006; Reed 2007; Thatchenkery and Chowdhry 2007). These are the arguments that support why AI as a research approach was chosen for this study.

Research process

The process of this research follows the practical guide of Thatchenkery (2003) on how to conduct appreciative organizational analysis. According to him the process of AI has six steps:

1. Identification of the life-giving forces (LGFs) or core values;
2. Expansion of LGFs or core values using appreciative interviews designed and conducted by the AI team;
3. Thematic analysis of the data to undertake organizational analysis;
4. Constructing possibility propositions;
5. Consensual validation of the propositions;
6. Creating and mandating an implementation team.

Master students were asked to conduct the first four steps of AI in their course projects, and because not all were members of the organizations studied it would have been difficult for them to lead the implementations of their development ideas. However, several project groups presented their possibility propositions developed for the project organization to the management and participants of the AI. This paper focuses only on the findings of the first step, i.e., on presenting the synthesis of the identified life-giving forces of 29 project organizations identified by master (MA) students.

The data were collected over four years, 2007-2010 by MA students for their AI research projects as part of their studies. There were altogether 29 small, medium, large, international, and local companies operating in different sectors like telecommunications, human resources management, consulting services, banking, and service providers involved in the projects (e.g., Oy Nordisk Film, Xtract Oy, NCSO Finland, Fortum, TietoEnator department, several departments of Nokia, Nokia Siemens Networks, Context Learning Finland Oy, Securitas Systems, Accenture Finland department, Headstart Oy, Finnair Technical Services, HyXo Oy, Swissotel Tallinn, bank department, Danone Finland Oy Ltd, Deloitte secretariat, IT firms). Through analyzing and synthesizing the findings of 319 appreciative interviews conducted by MA students, it was discovered that what gives life to organizations has direct impact on developing them. Next, a synthesis of the findings is presented.

Findings

The life-giving forces (LGFs) discovered during the studies are presented in ‘word clouds’ created with www.wordle.net (Feinberg 2009). Wordle is a toy for creating ‘word clouds’ from the given list of words or a text. The software of Wordle gives more emphasis to words that appear more frequently. Even though Wordle is presented as a toy for the purposes of this paper, it was suitable because of its excellent visual simplicity that gives an opportunity for easy interpretations of the findings.

In 2007, 74 appreciative interviews were conducted in 12 organizations. In Fig. 3 the synthesis of identified LGFs is presented. The main LGFs of these 12 organizations were teamwork, customer, others, individuals, people, skills, know-how, attitude, atmosphere, collegiality, professionalism, communication, cooperation, and service. In 2008, 37 appreciative interviews were conducted in 4 organizations, and their LGFs are shown in Fig. 4 below. Combining all LGFs of

these organizations, the most dominant ones were motivation, growth, collegiality and collaboration. In 2009, 109 appreciative interviews were conducted in 7 organizations involved in the studies. Synthesis of the LGFs (Fig. 5) of these specific organizations revealed that professionalism, teamwork, working environment, communication and customers were the most energizing forces. In 2010, 99 appreciative interviews were conducted in 6 organizations and the main LGFs were identified as work itself, team-spirit, ways of working, and knowledge (Fig. 6). Comparing the findings of all AI projects from 2007-2010 reveals that the work itself, teamwork, team-spirit, and working environment were present in all lists of identified LGFs. Professionalism, growth, collegiality are appreciated and they give meaning to work. An interesting finding is that in 2010 knowledge came out as the LGF of organizations.

It is valuable to see the synthesis of all LGFs of 29 organizations researched through the 2007-2010 period (Fig. 7). When all the LGFs identified in 319 appreciative interviews for 29 organizations were analyzed and synthesized, the most significant LGFs were teamwork, work and working environment, team-spirit, communication, cooperation, collegiality, collaboration, people, customers, know-how, professionalism, products, motivation, sharing, feedback, and atmosphere.

Students' teams reported back their findings to the organizations and in some cases they presented their reports to the people involved in the appreciative interviews. The feedback they received was very encouraging. The people who participated in the appreciative interviews were interested in receiving feedback, and they assessed the findings as valuable for them. Some interviewees were surprised that there were no questions asked related to problems and how to solve them, and rather 'unconditional positive questions' were asked. In several cases there were concrete actions formulated and taken based on the findings.



Figure 3. Life-giving forces in year one



Figure 4. Life-giving forces in year two



Figure 5. Life-giving forces in year three



Figure 6. Life-giving forces in year four

are unceasingly and dynamically evolving, learning and developing. Therefore, it is critical to focus on the human dimension that became the main driver of organizational development.

This paper sought to redirect the attention from changing organizations, where people were mostly seen as passive objects or targets of change, toward giving people a more active role in continuously developing their organizations. Therefore, the aim of this paper concurs with the argument of Mintzberg et al. (2010: 116) that probably the best way to manage change is just to let it happen or to create an environment where people can actively participate, be creative and innovative. This paper argues that, in the change processes, it is necessary to shift the role of people from a passive to an active one (i.e., from being an object to becoming a subject), and to redirect their thinking from problem solving to the strengths of the organizations. Furthermore, it is argued that because of these changes people will be more involved, energized, motivated and empowered to develop their organizations and to face more successfully the puzzles of the ongoing change.

Implications and value contribution

The paper has a number of implications. Theoretical implications could be the shift in thinking about organizations and organizational development from problem solving to developing and learning organizations. The managerial implications are that managers should focus on the LGFs, they should become knowledge facilitators by creating an environment where people and organizations are flourishing.

Most of the implications of this paper are in organizational research. As possible value contributions in this field, the following can be named: the importance of the clarification of philosophical standpoints (ontology, epistemology) of the researcher, the application and experimentation of new research approaches (AI and AR), and the increased attention to better understanding of the human factor in organizational development studies.

Limitations and future research

The paper has several limitations. The AI process was not fully covered as only four out of the six steps, as recommended by Thatchenkery (2003) were conducted. Further research is needed on the consensual validation of the propositions and on creating and mandating an implementation team. By going through the whole recommended cycle (Fig. 2), it would provide deeper understanding of the organizational development process.

This study has been qualitative research, which is a strength and weakness at the same time. While it provided a good understanding of the LGFs as drivers of development, the author, however, believes that quantitative research or a mixed-methods research could provide a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. Future research could be, for example, a case-study research where the findings of this research could be validated in one or more organizations.

Another limitation is that all organizations were located in Finland, in one geographical area. Additional research in different countries could enrich the findings and show differences in the LGFs. Additionally, it would be useful to conduct follow-up research on the organizations involved in this study to see the impact of the development propositions, and to find out what has happened after the findings were presented to the managers and participants of the AI.

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Note

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