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Building a Better World: Strengths-Based Regenerative Business Practices

Edited by

Bernard Mohr and Susan Donnan

Image courtesy of the Fowler Center For Business as Agent of World Benefit, Case Western Reserve University

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Introduction: Powerful Pathways to a Better World

Might strengths-based regenerative business practices be a pathway toward engagement of the business sector in building a better world as a core business strategy?

Bernard: A personal perspective

I am an immigrant twice over. When I was five, my mother took me, my two younger sisters, and my grandmother on a journey from Austria to Holland by rail, then by boat to Montreal, and then by train to Saskatchewan, Canada. We were met by my father, who a year earlier had left us to work there – in a country with a completely different culture and language– to earn sufficient money for our passage.

We lived in a farmhouse with no running water and an outdoor toilet, (during which my mother cared for us while doing her best to pursue her painting career). My first educational experience was a one –room schoolhouse, often accessible only by horse –drawn sleigh. Later we moved further east, to Toronto, Ontario.

Fast forward 30 years. Having completed studies at the Universities of Waterloo and Toronto, and Columbia University in New York, residencies at the Institute For Applied Behavioral Science and as founder of a burgeoning professional services firm, I applied for and was granted the status of Legal Permanent Resident in the United States – having promised to move my firm to the US, expand it and hire American citizens, promises I kept. So what?

The US gave me an opportunity to do the only thing my father ever asked of me when he reminded me (not infrequently) that “much is expected from those, to whom much is given”. I co-founded two US based consultancies and pursued a career in Organization Development, seeking wherever possible to make the lives of those within somewhat better. Sometimes this strategy of helping businesses to thrive by creating a better quality

of life for employees was successful – other times less so. As for my partners and me, not only were we reasonably compensated for our work, we had the incredible opportunity of co-shaping the young field of Appreciative Inquiry.

None of this would have been possible without the basic democratic infrastructure of the rule of law, the right to due process, the right to free speech and assembly, and the growing (albeit sometimes painfully slowly) movement, ever so slowly, toward what President Obama called “a more perfect union” – even as those left out grew larger in numbers. But greater social, economic and ecological progress seemed within reach.

Today, this picture looks different. The very real possibilities to co-create better opportunities and just rewards for the many that have historically been left out are rapidly slipping from our grasp. All of us living in the United States are careening toward a singular, all-powerful “unitary executive”. The traditional checks and balances of democracy have been nullified. Cruelty, chaos, and fear seem to increase with every news cycle.

The ideas in this issue are core to my search for a pathway that brings to life Paul Polman’s provocation: profits should come not from creating the world’s problems, but from solving them. Much has yet to be created for this vision to be achieved – but I cannot imagine a community of practitioners more capable than this one, working together, applying the tools and practices within our expertise and creating the necessary new ones that will bring this vision to life.

I hope you will be inspired, encouraged, and enlivened as you read this issue – a product that is something that could not have been created without the close collaboration of my colleague and co-editor, Susan Donnan, to whom I owe much.

The idea of [Business as Agent of World Benefit](#) (BAWB) is not new. But exemplars among what may be termed “legacy businesses” are few and there is skepticism. The need for tools and practices that build on the foundations of BAWB, that address the skepticism, and that are ever more accessible has never been more urgent.

A practical theory of change that supports business prosperity through building a better world needs more development.

Such practices¹ go well beyond philanthropy and doing-less-harm. They are activities that observably improve social, economic or environmental challenges within the business’s ecosystem. Might strengths-based regenerative business practices be such a pathway – engaging the business sector in building a better world as a core business strategy?

Through the development of market-based solutions, regenerative business practices deliver value for:

¹ For more detail, see the Appendix on page 12.

- Both the common good: society, and/or communities, and/or nature,
- And the business: shareholders/investors and/or partners/suppliers, and/or employees, and/or customers;

... thereby building a better world for all, as described by frameworks like the UN's [Sustainable Development Goals and Performance Indicators](#).

The big question: under what conditions would businesses (other than small mission-driven start-ups or “born to do good” companies) really go beyond doing less harm to actually developing new products or services that solve the world’s problems?

Enter *regenerative business*, a term which has become somewhat fashionable, but suffers the risk of sliding into obscurity – maybe due to “buzzword fatigue” or being linked mainly with ecological issues rather than also extending to our equally critical social and economic challenges. Assuming that, under certain conditions, businesses could and would do what is needed to build a better world, we conceived this special issue as a way:

1. To offer pragmatic examples of regenerative business model development and deployment in action, by focusing at the level of practices, as defined above.
2. To support exploration of questions such as:

What if we shifted our focus from building better organizations to helping our business sector clients prosper by building a better world?

- What if we shifted our focus from building better organizations to helping our business sector clients prosper by building a better world? Not through philanthropy or doing less harm, but by revitalizing the social, economic, or environmental systems touched by them? What would our work as practitioners become?
- What “practices” (e.g. activities, tools, mindset shifts) might enable our business clients to unleash the trillions of yet-unspent investment dollars in moving the needle beyond what is achieved through philanthropy and doing-less-harm activities?
- What would a world look like in which, in the words of Paul Polman (2025), “profits come not from creating the world’s problems, but from solving them” have become “business-as-usual”?

- What benefits would that have for the businesses we work with, for their members? Their customers? Their partners? The world?
 - How do we get started?
3. To invite this community of practice to support the business sector in shifting from prospering in the world we have to prospering by building a better world.

Additional definitions of terms used:

Regenerative challenges are the opportunities within a business's ecosystem for revitalizing the social, economic or environmental systems it touches.

1. **Regenerative challenges** are the opportunities within a business's ecosystem for revitalizing the social, economic or environmental systems it touches. Strengths-based regenerative business practices are the HOW for seizing those opportunities.
2. **Strengths-based practices** (Adapted from the [Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry](#)):
 - Intentionally center attention on identifying, amplifying, and leveraging individual and collective strengths (aspirations, resources, capabilities);
 - Leveraging what's already working to highlight possibilities and direct energy toward co-creating desired outcomes.
3. **Beyond sustainability:** While recognizing the significant value of harm mitigation and philanthropic contributions by the private sector, regenerative business practices offer a step beyond – an opportunity for businesses of any size to use their strengths to prosper by building a better world.
4. **Outcomes for business can be:**
 - Tangible and measurable, e.g. increased market share, higher profitability, enhanced brand recognition, new products or services.
 - Intangible, observable, and sometimes measurable, e.g. expanded social capital, elevated innovation capabilities, a more engaged workforce, higher retention of key employees, etc.
5. Outcomes for society can be in our economic, social, or ecological domains, as described by frameworks such as:

- [The UN's Sustainable Development Goals and Performance Indicators.](#)
- The principles, goals, and indicators of the [Future Fit Business Benchmark.](#)
- The [Economics of Mutuality Foundation](#)'s metrics.
- The [Flourishing Business Canvas](#) – a tool for businesses to use in deciding what social, ecological, (and business) outcomes it wants to pursue, and how to pursue them.
- The standards provided by groups such as:
 1. GRI ([Global Reporting Initiative](#)) – broad sustainability reporting;
 2. SASB ([Sustainability Accounting Standards Board](#)) – sector-specific, investor-focused;
 3. ISSB ([International Sustainability Standards Board](#), 2022 , which has consolidated [Sustainability Accounting Standards Board](#) and [Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures](#) into a global baseline).

The three parts of this issue

Case stories

The issue begins with six case stories ranging from an individual entrepreneur to small and medium enterprises, and from there to national and global enterprises.



To read more about the shipyard, go to page 14

- A CEO's personal journey into regenerative business practices while taking a US shipyard from "40 days to broke" to a more than 5,000-employee multibillion-dollar shipyard.
- A global enterprise that offers satellite services to help organizations ranging from small-scale farmers to large industrial corporations and governmental entities worldwide to halt or reverse deforestation and support the protection of indigenous communities.

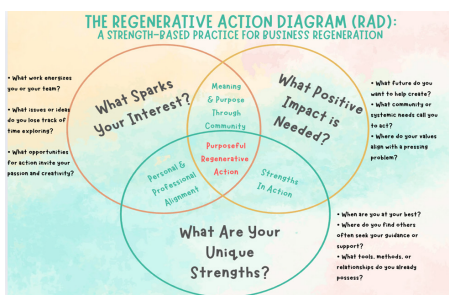


To read about the place-specific real estate approach, go to page 33

- An ecosystem-wide change initiative that convened over 110 organizations to improve the social, economic and environmental viability of the circularity of compostables and compost within the US.
- A real estate approach that aims to align business goals with enhanced vitality and viability of socio-ecological systems through place-specific and life-supporting design. In this ecological worldview, buildings are participants in living systems.
- An entrepreneur whose relationship with her community fosters an ecosystem where both individual capability and collective purpose drive sustainable social and economic change in South Africa.
- In the Maasai Mara region of Kenya, partnerships that prioritize cross-stakeholder relationships as well as aligning business success with community wellbeing and environmental stewardship which have led to clean water access, women's empowerment, and natural-resource conservation benefiting local wellbeing, ecotourism, and brand loyalty for the businesses involved.



To read about the revised B Corp standards, go to page 55



To read more about the Regenerative Action Diagram, go to page 70

Unsurprisingly, none of these cases fit 100% of our definition of regenerative business practices. And yet, taken as a mosaic, they offer a path forward in a moment when the need and potential for businesses to build a better world is more pressing than ever.

Tools to catalyse regenerative business practices

Three articles follow which describe tools that can be used to catalyze regenerative business practices:

- Conversations that, guided by generative questions, grounded in systems thinking, and rooted in reframing reciprocity with the living world, catalyze not just regeneration, but the dynamic capability to flourish.
- The recently revised B Corp standards with seven impact topics are a tool that creates opportunities for businesses to engage in certification as a process of regenerative development.
- The Regenerative Action Diagram is a tool for aligning personal values and purposeful business actions in multiple settings ranging from providing coaching for individuals to workshops for teams and strategic sessions for small and medium enterprises.

Perspectives on regenerative business

The third part of this issue presents two very different perspectives that reflect on possibilities for the Appreciative Inquiry community in relation to the idea, practice, and language of regenerative business.

Can we say that businesses are currently regenerative?

We believe that, today, no business is 100% regenerative. However, this issue describes a path forward and the road will become clearer as we walk it.

When we first sent out our call for submissions, we wondered whether we would find any evidence of strengths-based processes effectively supporting the development and deployment of regenerative business practices. We did.

There are two seminal resources for this work:

The first is a powerful framework for contrasting “doing-less-harm” activities and regenerative business practices, as described by Chris Laszlo, David Cooperider, and Ron Fry (2024):

‘System-wide positive impact: scalable business innovations have a discernible capacity to “move the needle” on social and global challenges.’
Laszlo et al.

Businesses need to distinguish between three types of innovation impacts to maintain their credibility and legitimacy. The first is doing less harm, where the goal is to minimize social wrongs and reduce ecological footprints. The second is incremental positive impact, where the goal is to increase prosperity, regenerate nature, and improve wellbeing through initiatives that are typically of limited scope. The third is system-wide positive impact, where scalable business innovations have a discernible capacity to ‘move the needle’ on social and global challenges such as climate change and social equity. (2024, p. 168)

Most of our case stories describe type 1 innovations, but they have the seeds of type 2 innovations. Two case stories come closest to achieving the impact of a type 2 innovation:

- The article about Airbus Starling is an example of the development of a market-based solution that addresses ecological and economic challenges at scale, moving increasingly toward regenerative practices.
- “Circularity of Compostables and Compost within the US” is an example of ecosystem collaboration at the industry level within a country.

Mirror flourishing: how a business can flourish when it shifts from focusing on its internal operations to focusing on how it is building a better world.

The second resource, on **mirror flourishing**, is the revolutionary concept of how a business can flourish when it shifts from focusing on its internal operations to focusing on how it is building a better world. It was first described some thirteen years ago in an article by David Cooperrider and Ron Fry (2012) which lays out the “what” and “why” and “how” of an idea that is almost as paradigm shifting as Appreciative Inquiry but has yet to be fully used within our consulting work.

New opportunities for AI practitioners

A [2023 study of 800 global C-suite executives](#), found that over half do not believe efforts to make their business “regenerative” are working. However, 58% said that “developing more regenerative business models is an opportunity for the business”.

The world seems to have shifted on its axis in recent years, but might there still be clients seeking help with what we are good at? Specifically:

- Strengths-based regenerative business model development and deployment;
- Strengths-based, conversational approaches to ecosystem engagement and orchestration;
- Ways in which mindsets are shifting, from a mechanistic to an ecological worldview, one that recognizes our world as a complex living system wherein social, environmental, and economic systems reinforce each other.

All of this challenges us to design increasingly powerful and accessible ways to engage whole ecosystems, inclusive of all voices, by tapping into their collective intelligence, aspirations, and capabilities.

Our Discovery, Dream, Design, and Deployment work must become increasingly outwardly focused on business and operating models design as opportunities for the co-creation of “system-wide positive impact, where scalable business innovations have a discernible capacity to ‘move the needle’ on social and global challenges such as climate change and social equity.”

Regeneration (revitalizing our social, economic and ecological systems) is a long-term journey. It may begin with doing less harm (minimizing social wrongs and reducing ecological footprints), it is also more than that if we want a type 2 impact. We will need to support each other and, yet again, reinvent our field.

Conclusion

We invite you to join us by becoming practitioner-scientists. Help us to further explore the questions about regenerative practice:

Engage your curiosity – read, listen, talk with others.

- **Step one:** Engage your curiosity – read, listen, talk with others.
- **Step two:** Develop hypotheses – “what if?”, “how might we?”.
- **Step three:** Try things to test your hypotheses.
- **Step four:** Reflect on what worked and why.
- **Step five:** Share it all – the good, the bad, the ugly and your ideas for moving forward!
- **Step six:** See step one: go back and start again.

Bernard Mohr and Susan Donnan
November, 2025

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Appendix: Examples of benefits from the regenerative business practices from our case stories

Note: Readers will recognize most of these practices. What relates these “practices” to regenerative business is the context in which they are used and the impact sought. All practices described are situation-specific and would require re-customization for every other environment. The benefits described by our authors largely fall into the category “observed but not measured”.

Case story	Benefits of regenerative business practices
My Journey into Regenerative Business Practices Alan Lerchbacker	<p><i>Societal benefits:</i> Supports a more effective transition by prisoners back into society; out-of-work shrimpers became aware of and obtained well-paying employment at a time when their industry had been devastated by low demand and high gas prices.</p> <p><i>Business benefits:</i> Provides an important source of reliable employees willing and able to learn needed skills plus growing “social capital” for the business.</p>
Airbus Starling: From Mitigation to Regeneration Michael Chemouny, Julie Barre, and Montaine Foch	<p><i>Social and ecological benefits:</i> Accelerated progress toward companies’ zero-deforestation and net-zero commitments; significant contribution to nature conservation; means for organizations to contribute to environmental stewardship; contribution to the protection of Indigenous peoples, their lands, and territories.</p> <p><i>Business benefits:</i> Increased interest from multinational corporations; engagement of employees who feel proud of such environment-related solutions.</p>
Improving the Circularity of Compostables Arielle T. Sullivan and Candy V. Castellanos Kratz	<p><i>Social and ecological benefits:</i> A first-of-its-kind roadmap for the future of circular, regenerative materials management in the US; creation of a stewardship group to guide and support this network of stakeholders.</p> <p><i>Business benefits:</i> A strengthened US composting system network; trusting relationships; increased empathy and understanding of one another’s business challenges and realities; ability for businesses to work together across sectors.</p>
Uncovering Place Potential Lenna Lockwood and Emmanuel Pauwels	<p><i>Social and ecological benefits:</i> Uncovering a rich and largely forgotten Aztec history; designing a tourist resort as an evolving living system; ongoing long-term creation of social, and ecological value for employees, and the local community; collaboration across ecosystem stakeholder divides.</p> <p><i>Business benefits:</i> Ongoing long-term value creation financial, social, and ecological value; resilience and protection from devaluation and obsolescence; collaboration across ecosystem stakeholder divides.</p>

Regenerative Entrepreneurship Zosia Bucheli	<p><i>Social benefits:</i> A community culture of self-empowerment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 66% of job applicants supported by Rosy successfully secured employment.• Empowered individuals in her community, inspired to pursue education and entrepreneurship.• Connections between aspiring entrepreneurs and major companies in South Africa.• 100% of the elderly individuals Rosy supported reported increased confidence and a sense of empowerment. <p><i>Business benefits</i> to Rosy as an entrepreneur: reported an increase in her confidence level reinforcing her commitment to expanding her influence and impact.</p>
Uniting for Mara: Regenerative Partnerships in Action Claire Fialkov and David Haddad	<p><i>Social and ecological benefits:</i> Increased wellbeing among residents of involved communities; improved health outcomes; women's empowerment; natural-resource conservation; enhanced employment opportunities; increased trust between ecosystem members.</p> <p><i>Business benefits:</i> relational capital; enhanced resilience; increased ecotourism; increased brand loyalty; increased vitality and sustainability of the business ecosystem.</p>

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Alan Lerchbacker

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My Journey Into Regenerative Business Practices: A CEO's Story

This article describes how a new CEO and a small group of dedicated employees took a shipyard that was '40 days to broke' and created one of the Navy's best shipyards – through creative collaborations with various different members of the community within which they operated. The values of gender equity, quality education, and innovation guided the creation of win-win solutions that combined the strengths of the business with the strengths of its community ecosystem.

After 26 years in the US Navy running operations for large teams, I was finally a CEO – the first CEO for Austal USA in Mobile, Alabama. On April 20, 2000, as I drove onto our 47-acre site, I could see our trailer and my 65 other teammates. None of us saw the more than 5,000-employee, multibillion-dollar shipyard we would become (Austal Corp., 2024). Achieving that would involve a personal and organizational journey that helped me grow my leadership skills, while developing my own growing understanding of how a business can succeed by being a force for positive social and economic change in a community.

My initial orders were clear: build the world's first ship capable of a speed of 50 knots and grow the company. We had no sales or backlog so, with the exception of our employees, we had little to build on. Fortunately our employees, especially those who came to us from Boeing in Seattle and had worked under [Alan Mulally](#)'s leadership, understood how important honesty was in dealing with the sort of challenges we were facing (Yeager, 2025).

40 days to broke

Walking around the shipyard and speaking honestly with our team was easy. Everyone understood why one of the first things we did was to post a huge sign at the front gate tracking DTB (days to broke). That initial sign told everyone we were less than 40 DTB. We didn't think about saving our community or the world. Our focus was on trying to keep our doors open. Luckily every employee was engaged in moving Austal USA forward. Over a short period of time, we

*Growing our community
would be an essential part of
growing our business.*

*Sometimes, if you are open
to it, opportunities for a
regenerative business practice
fall into your lap.*



The first ship capable of a speed of 50 knots: The LCS

would learn together about how growing our community would be an essential part of growing our business. Only much later did I come to understand that this was something called being a “regenerative business”.

In 2015, a series of international discussions on sustainable development culminated in a set of seventeen global goals for 2030 which became known as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Ryan et al., 2023). We were not familiar with these goals at that time, but in retrospect three of them were embedded in the work of our team at Austal USA: #4 quality education, #5 gender equity, and #9 industry, innovation, and infrastructure.

Gender equity at Austal

As recently as 2000, in most US shipyards women were referred to as “girls in the office” because no women worked in the shipyard. By the time we reached a level of 400 employees we had more women in our workforce than we had men. This change happened in increments, starting with the layoff of many women from Boeing’s Seattle plant. I received a call early one day. The gentleman on the other end was straightforward, “You hiring?” he asked. I told him we were, and he told me he, his wife, and their dog would hop on his chopper. He became my welding supervisor, but she became Vice President of Education. She drove our gender equity and quality education programs. Sometimes, if you are open to it, opportunities for a regenerative business practice fall into your lap – even if you don’t know the language!

Quality education and innovation at Austal

The world had never seen a ship capable of a speed of 50 knots: we would build the first one (Polmar, 2003). Nothing speaks speed-to-action like creativity unleashed with imagination running wild (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Creativity and innovation became our mantra – not just creativity in manufacturing but also in human resource management.

For example, we needed to expand our workforce, rapidly. Apprenticeship programs are a traditional solution, but they tend to be slow because they are usually generated within the business without much outside involvement. As it turned out Mobile’s Chamber of Commerce was highly active. With the help of the mayor and the Chamber we were successful in bringing Austal to the community.

We brought together our employees with the dean of the University of Southern Alabama’s business school, the principles from five local high schools, and the two trade schools. In one weekend, our community helped Austal develop our

In one weekend, our community helped Austal develop our apprenticeship program.

apprenticeship program. This program grew to be over 400 men and women, the largest in Alabama (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2021).

With the apprenticeship program in full bloom, we turned our attention to the H-1 visa program. From small community collaboration, we expanded our creativity to the global stage. We asked ourselves “How can we bring worldwide talent to Mobile to teach our trade schools, high schools, and companies about shipbuilding?” Again, we were successful by reaching out to members of our ecosystem.

Opening doors

In some situations, it is better to block a poorly thought-out intervention, while in others opening the door to new ideas brings the energy needed to kick-start new ideas.

In this case, the doors opening were those of Senators Shelby and Sessions. Not many people can just walk into a senator’s office, let alone his inner office and sit down with them, but all I had to do was show up in Washington, DC and I had access not only metaphorically, but physically, to walk into their offices and see them face to face. It is usually hard enough to get an audience with senators, let alone have them fly to your community, in this case, down to Mobile, Alabama to walk through my shipyard and meet my team whenever I asked them to come. These two senators were invaluable in blocking and opening doors for our entire team to expand our H-1 visa reach globally (Hahn & Tampe, 2020).

Yet another innovation in collaboration within our ecosystem was being invited to speak at local churches.

Yet another innovation in collaboration within our ecosystem was being invited to speak at local churches. This was an opportunity created by a global crisis. At the time, China was flooding the United States market with tons of shrimp and Middle Eastern actions were driving up gas prices. This combination devastated the shrimping communities along the Gulf of Mexico (Shrimp Alliance, 2005). Bayou La Batre was a small shrimping community less than ten miles from Austal USA.

Expanding Austal’s team in innovative directions

Through speaking at these churches, the Vietnamese shrimpers, who were out of work, learned about Austal USA’s apprentice programs and joined the Austal team. They thrived, dominating the welding, engineering, and electrical sectors with the apprenticeship program taking over each of these sectors and running them like small business enterprises (Thai et al., 2020).

Additionally, we engaged with a prison work-release program. Our connection to the Alabama Prison System was through one of our employees, whose family member was connected to the prison warden. With help from that employee and some of our suppliers, we were able to bring the warden and his team to our shipyard. Together, we designed the work-release program for our shipyard (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2021). Prisoners would be bused to Austal USA each day and work in entry-level positions for four hours. They would then be trained in apprenticeship positions for the remaining four hours of the day. Upon completing this work-release program and their time in prison, these workers were automatically enrolled in one of the four apprentice programs at Austal USA (Vishner & LaVigne, 2021).

Austal USA's shipbuilding team



Conclusion

The more the leadership of a business reaches out to its ecosystem, the more innovative ideas its employees will develop.

Every business's real future lies in its outreach to what some call its ecosystem: its communities, villages, cities, states – and even the world. The more the leadership of a business reaches out to its ecosystem, the more innovative ideas its employees will develop (Stavros et al., 2008). The journey towards regenerative business practices doesn't need a lot of academic language. It really only needs an openness to seeing what the world outside our own walls has to offer and a willingness to collaborate in the achievement of mutual goals.

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Airbus's Starling: From Mitigation to Regeneration

Airbus's Starling platform leverages its satellite imagery and artificial intelligence to provide accurate, high-resolution monitoring of forests. This helps organisations from small-scale farmers to large industrial corporations and governmental entities to halt or reverse deforestation and support Indigenous communities. Providing the precise measurement of carbon footprints resulting from land-use change contributes to global conservation and restoration.

The zero-deforestation challenge

Contemporary business environment places significant pressure on the agrifood, chemical, healthcare, and hygiene sectors to transform their supply chain operations. A central component of this transformation is the implementation of stringent zero-deforestation commitments.

Increasingly rigorous regulations necessitate that companies ensure their supply chains are demonstrably deforestation-free. For example, the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) is designed to ensure that products entering or leaving the EU are not linked to deforestation. However, evidence of the status and progress of zero-deforestation commitments remains a considerable challenge, as many existing solutions fail to meet market expectations and regulatory requirements due to insufficient accuracy.

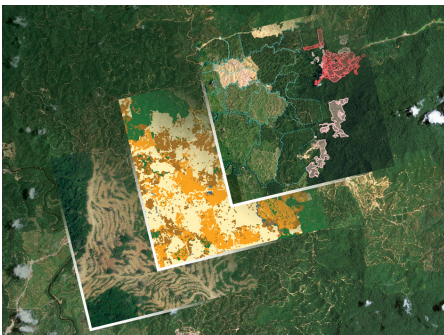
Additionally, because of increasing demand from both consumers and regulatory bodies for greater supply chain transparency, companies are now expected to provide demonstrable proof that their raw materials are ethically sourced.

At the same time, many companies are prioritising environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives with a significant focus on reducing carbon emissions, and on replanting and regenerating forests.

The Starling solution, a step towards regeneration

In this context, Airbus recognised the opportunity to create a new service leveraging its technology and innovation, its extensive satellite imagery assets, and its collaboration with ecosystem stakeholders.

Through a collaborative endeavour between [Airbus](#) and [Earthworm Foundation](#) in 2016, Starling was conceived as an innovative satellite solution to assist companies in demonstrating adherence to their no-deforestation commitments. A successful six-month pilot, involving the palm oil supply chains of Ferrero and Nestlé, demonstrated Starling's capacity for unbiased, regular monitoring of extensive geographical areas, accurately detecting and identifying changes in forest cover.



Detailed analytical capability permits the differentiation between natural forests, forest plantations, planted forests, and agroforestry.
Courtesy of Airbus Starling

Satellite imagery, augmented by artificial intelligence, provides comprehensive insights into global forest cover. Data from various sources, including Sentinel and Airbus's Pléiades Neo very high-resolution imagery, is utilised to monitor vegetation. By transforming this data into highly accurate and accessible land cover maps, Starling offers high-quality intelligence of forestry changes. Its detailed analytical capability permits the differentiation between natural forests, forest plantations, planted forests, and agroforestry. Upon detection of deforestation, companies receive immediate alerts, facilitating prompt implementation of corrective measures, supported by Earthworm Foundation.

Continuous evolution

Starling is a continuously evolving platform, broadening its commodity coverage from cocoa to soy, including palm oil, coffee, rubber, and wood. It is constantly improving its global geographical range and attracting increasing interest from multinational corporations. These include innovations such as:

- The 2018 expansion of scope to encompass all global palm oil cultivation areas, alongside the initiation of a pilot programme for cocoa in Central Africa.
- Additional features that align with the new requirements of the EUDR, formally adopted in 2023.

The Starling platform is being applied to regenerative initiatives like reforestation, environmental protection, and carbon capture.

Starling's impacts include ... a significant contribution to nature conservation by providing companies worldwide with precise and readily usable data.

Although developed initially for zero deforestation, the Starling platform is being applied to regenerative initiatives like reforestation, environmental protection, and carbon capture. For example, in agroforestry, trees are combined with crops and/or livestock on the same piece of land, which increases the benefits to the landowner as well as maintaining forest integrity and environmental health.

Environmental and societal impacts

The benefits of Starling extend beyond regulatory compliance to include tangible impacts on societies, communities, and the natural environment. These impacts include:

- Accelerated progress towards companies' zero deforestation and net-zero commitments by accurately quantifying their environmental footprint across their entire supply chain.
- A significant contribution to nature conservation by providing companies worldwide with precise and readily usable data, enabling them to engage effectively with suppliers, to mitigate risks, and to verify commitments.
- Means for organisations to contribute to environmental stewardship, either by protecting untouched forests or by restoring previously deforested land.
- Contribution to the protection of Indigenous peoples, their lands, and territories by halting or reversing deforestation and land degradation. These communities often inhabit the most pristine tropical forests, underscoring the critical importance of both reducing carbon emissions and supporting biodiversity for planetary health.

The Ivory Coast case study

In the Ivory Coast, the government's deployment of Starling in the protected forest of Cavally facilitated more than the rapid detection and mitigation of illegal activities. It also fostered a profound sense of commitment among local authorities and communities through supporting them in optimising existing plantations, diversifying income streams, and initiating reforestation campaigns, all aimed at promoting forest rejuvenation. The observed impact has been significant:

- Deforestation has been curtailed, with an impressive 38,968 hectares of land preserved.
- Replanting efforts have resulted in the establishment of 75,919 new trees in the region.
- As well, 777 hectares of forests are undergoing natural regeneration.

Beyond the Ivory Coast, Starling supports one of the world's largest cocoa traders in monitoring deforestation within its cocoa supply chain in Brazil (Bahia and Pará), Ecuador, and Colombia. We also work with major confectionery manufacturers in their palm oil or pulp-and-paper supply chains in Brazil, Peru, Mexico, and Costa Rica.

Future developments

Both the initial pilot programmes and ongoing engagement with multinational businesses have been instrumental in shaping Starling's address to diverse industry needs. This ensures that Starling remains adaptable and effective across a broad spectrum of applications.

Starling's artificial intelligence algorithms will be adapted for new ecosystems and its coverage will be broadened to an even greater variety of commodities.

For example, in response to emerging European regulations on the importation of raw materials or processed products implicated in deforestation, Starling's artificial intelligence algorithms will be adapted for new ecosystems and its coverage will be broadened to an even greater variety of commodities.

The vision for Starling extends beyond its current capabilities. The aspiration is to delve deeper into assessing biomass and its carbon storage potential, as well as to expand reforestation and other regenerative activities, to achieve an increasingly positive global impact.

Conclusion

Our journey began in 2016 with conversations about "how might our unique capabilities, resources, and values contribute to a better world in ways that also honour our shareholder obligations".

The answers have evolved over time:

- Moving from pilots to global scale-ups.

A satellite view of mixed-use land
Courtesy of Airbus Starling

- Moving from an initial focus on the “mitigation use case” of zero deforestation to seizing opportunities for increasingly regenerative applications such as reforestation, environmental protection, and support for the protection of Indigenous communities.



Today, after more than nine years of continuous improvement, Starling operates in 33 countries, covering 152 provinces, with a historical imagery archive spanning 20 years, and addresses commodities such as coffee, cocoa, and rubber. The platform supports a range of stakeholders – from small-scale farmers to large industrial global corporations and governmental entities.

Starling's success comes from the many hours of conversations.

Starling's success comes from the many hours of conversations – with stakeholders in all roles and levels, with the many members of the Airbus community and is based on the belief that together we can have a positive impact and make a regenerative difference for our planet, and our societies and communities.

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[FrieslandCampina trusts Starling for their sustainable palm oil sourcing](#)

[Alianza Team uses Starling to Assess Peatlands and Forests Across their Palm Oil Supply Chain](#)

[Monitor deforestation across your supply chain and comply with EUDR](#)

[How Earth Observation is Contributing to Combating Deforestation Globally](#)

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Improving the Circularity of Compostables

A Regenerative Systems Approach to Transforming the US Composting Ecosystem

This article highlights strengths-based regenerative intervention practices used in a recent change effort to improve the circularity of compostables and compost within the US composting ecosystem. This whole systems, cross-sector initiative convened over 110 organizations to co-create a unified strategy for the industry at a critical inflection point. The intervention deepened the capacity for collaborative working relationships across organizations and helped participants align together to become a stronger network.

The US composting and compostables ecosystem, two critical components of implementing municipal, business, and community circularity goals for sustainable waste management, are currently grappling with a series of systemic challenges that threaten its long-term viability. A canary in the coal mine emerged: in the spring of 2023, several large commercial composting facilities began rejecting food-contact compostable packaging materials – previously a key tool in diverting food waste from landfills.

These abrupt policy changes created shockwaves across the country and industry, highlighting vulnerabilities in the aspiration of circularity for composting systems. This shift was driven by an influx of look-alike, but non-compostable “eco”-marketed and plastic products that were contaminating commercial composting system processes and getting into compost end-products.

This development poses a serious threat to both climate and material circularity goals. Compostable packaging has played a vital role in capturing food scraps for diversion to commercial composting facilities and reducing methane emissions in landfills – where food waste accounts for an estimated 58% of fugitive methane emissions from municipal solid waste (Krause et al., 2023). If compostables are no longer accepted in compost collection and processing

systems, both food and packaging waste may be redirected to landfills, worsening environmental degradation.

The root of the problem

At the root of the problem lies a fragmented composting ecosystem, characterized by inconsistent communication, disjointed infrastructure, inadequate policy alignment, and a lack of shared goals among key actors. Without standardized labeling, clear certification processes, and reliable product performance and breakdown in real-world conditions, the composting industry cannot scale in a sustainable way.

To address this, the Compost Manufacturing Alliance launched the *Improving the Circularity of Compostables + Compost* initiative – a bold two-year regenerative systems change initiative. This article covers the first three phases of the initiative. The fourth Strategic Plan Activation phase is ongoing.

Figure 1. Initiative roadmap



Applying a regenerative approach

The regenerative movement extends beyond sustainability to work with complex ecosystems.

The regenerative movement extends beyond sustainability to work with complex ecosystems capable of renewal, evolution, and thriving. As defined by thought leaders Giles Hutchins and Laura Storm, regeneration is “creating the conditions conducive for life to continuously renew itself, to transcend into new forms, and to flourish amid continual change” (Hutchins & Storm, 2019). The term has its origins in biology and natural sciences, relating to the ability of cells, organisms, and ecosystems to renew themselves.



Co-creating a common future

Regeneration commonly refers to processes aimed at restoring or revitalizing living organisms, ecosystems, or social systems within which these fields operate (Konietzko et al., 2023). Regeneration is also gaining traction as a framework for fostering more sustainable and life-affirming organizational practices (Muñoz & Branzei, 2021).

Regenerative system change, according to Arielle Sullivan, one of the authors of this article, is defined as applying living systems thinking to the process design and facilitation of complex, large-scale systems change initiatives and interventions. It leverages the science of complex adaptive systems in the design of change interventions which create conditions for flourishing and resilience across and within organizations spanning ecological, economic, and social dimensions.

Improving the circularity of compostables and compost

The *Improving the Circularity of Compostables + Compost* initiative is regenerative because changes that improve circularity have the potential to directly improve the health of local ecosystems that are impacted by solid waste systems and material supply chains. The practice of collaboration sets the conditions for diverse actors in the composting ecosystem to learn to work synergistically, which has a direct impact on restoring and revitalizing the industry, as well as its interconnected ecosystems across the industry.

*A living systems philosophy
... unearths interdependent
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direction.*

Incorporating “living systems principles” helped the project transcend traditional modes of strategic planning which are problem-oriented and linear in nature. A living systems philosophy does not seek to define a root problem or issue; instead, it unearths interdependent variables contributing to a stuck or stagnant state and shifts energy by generating new, positive intention and direction to honor the common ground present within the system. Honoring common ground is an example of adopting a strengths-based approach because it highlights positive aspects of the intended direction that participants are willing to support and champion.

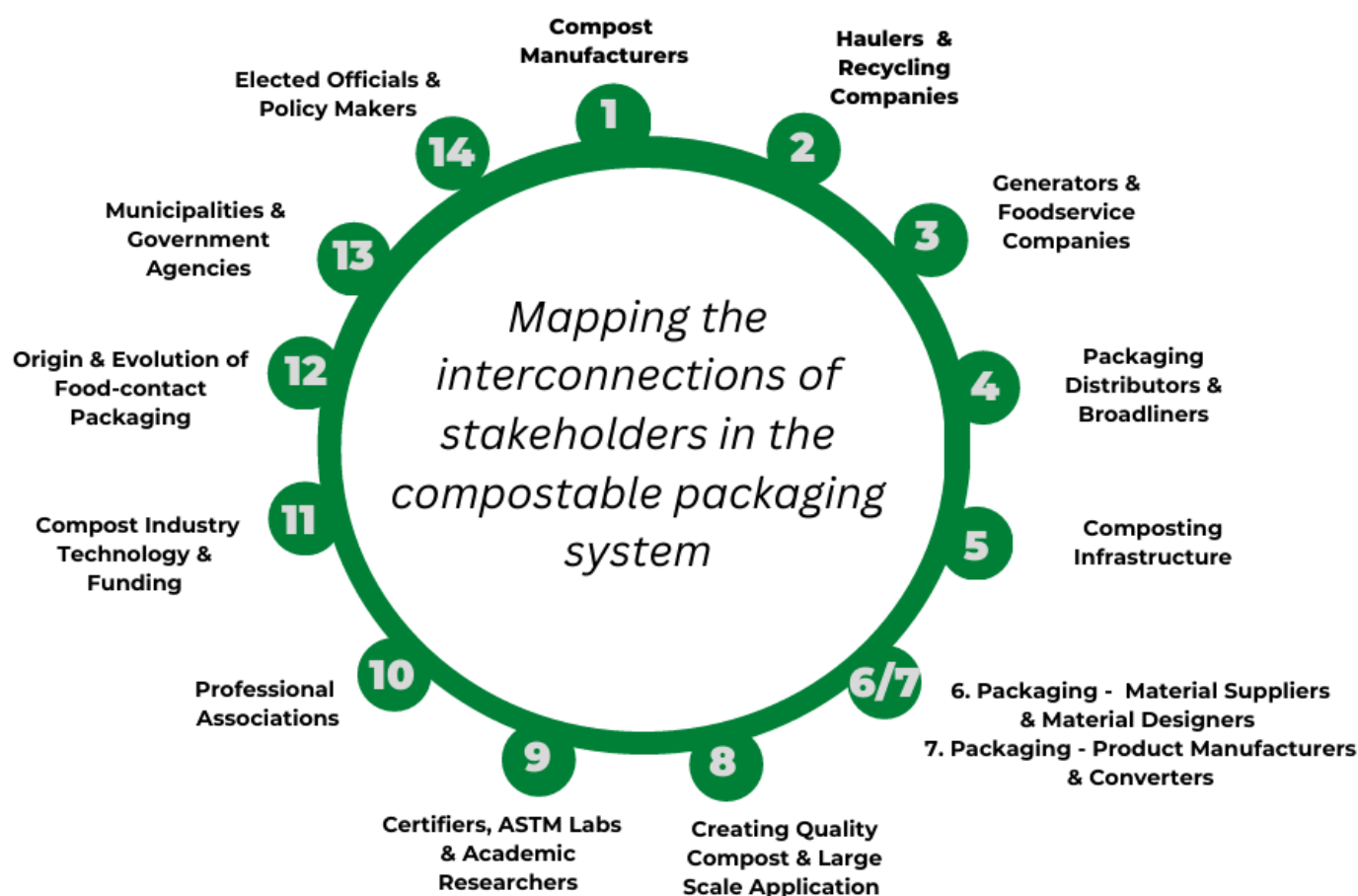
Leveraging large group interventions as a catalyst for regenerative systems change

To activate regenerative system change, the project employed Future Search methodology. Co-founded by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff in the 1990s, Future Search is an internationally recognized planning process designed to build consensus and common ground across large, complex systems (Janoff, 2010).

Over fourteen months, the initiative organized fourteen discovery workshops with key stakeholder groups across the solid waste system and value chain, culminating in a three-day in-person Future Search event that convened more than 110 organizations, representing a microcosm of the US composting ecosystem.

The Discovery Workshops, which were recorded and made available on the project's YouTube channel, were key in setting the stage for the Future Search event, as they provided a public and accessible library of sector-specific insights. Each of the fourteen workshops featured a panel of thought leaders and experts who could speak from the perspective of their specific part of the system or supply chain.

Figure 2. Discovery workshop sector-specific stakeholder panels



Future Search operates on four key principles:

- 1. The whole system participates.** A cross-section of the whole system is represented on the steering committee responsible for planning the event; and the event participants represent a microcosm of the whole

The five key regenerative design principles ... are appreciative and generative in that they create positive direction and momentum in a system.



Future Search participants cheer on Future Scenario presentations

system from a wide variety of perspectives, e.g. decision-makers, influencers, people with direct experience and expertise on the topic who have on-the-ground information, and people who will be affected by the outcome.

2. The work begins by building a context that represents the whole system.

3. The focus is on the future and building common ground.

4. People self-manage their work. Individuals only commit to doing things they personally can accomplish or influence. and use dialogue, not “problem solving”, as the main tool. This means helping each other do the tasks and taking responsibility individually for perceptions and actions.

The Future Search model was the perfect design to ensure that the planning was not top-down or prescriptive, but co-created every step of the way. This empowered the industry to work together, across differences and strengths to design a path toward improved circularity. It also paralleled many of the same values found within living systems principles that are the foundation for regenerative work.

Living systems principles (regenerative design principles)

Throughout the initiative, five key regenerative design principles were used to guide structure, participation, and strategy development. These principles are appreciative and generative in that they create positive direction and momentum in a system.

1. Holism The project was deliberately structured to take a holistic view of the compostable landscape. Each Discovery workshop focused on a specific sector – composters, food service providers, haulers, certifiers, etc. – but also invited participants to explore system-wide interdependencies. Insights from these workshops were synthesized to inform the Future Search event, allowing the group to see and respond to the full complexity of the composting ecosystem. By embracing holism, the initiative helped actors move beyond siloed thinking or traditional problem-solving methods.

2. Uniqueness and diversity Diversity is viewed as an asset, and source of innovation and resilience. The project engaged thirteen distinct groups representing key players and actors across public, private, and

The inflections points that inspired the Improving Circularity initiative were caused by individual entities operating in silos, unaware their actions and policies were having unintended and undermining effects on other actors.

non-profit sectors who contributed to shaping and influencing the strategic planning process together.

The inflections points that inspired the *Improving Circularity* initiative were caused by individual entities operating in silos, unaware their actions and policies were having unintended and undermining effects on other actors in this deeply interconnected ecosystem:

- Municipalities and policy makers were creating collection programs without collaborating with key infrastructure stakeholders e.g. composters and hauling/recycling companies.
- Compost packaging manufacturers were not collaborating with commercial composting facilities to design materials that would successfully break down within the operational time constraints of the different processing systems.
- Generators and food service companies were offering look-alike plastic and compostable products without visual delineation that public and commercial consumers could easily identify.

Each audience brought unique challenges, goals, and areas of expertise. Many had differing levels of trust with one another, as some had a long history of negative impacts coming from decisions made by other stakeholder groups. Some were in direct competition with one another.

This type of environment sets a fertile ground for rich co-creation when trust can be rebuilt. In the Future Search process, the activity of sharing “prouds and sorries” offers this opportunity, where each stakeholder group shares how they have contributed positively to the system as well as how they may have contributed to the issues faced within the system. This public acknowledgment and accountability helps release tensions, allows people to see one another in a new light, and creates an opening for a new collective, co-created beginning. Throughout the event, instructions and questions were framed in an appreciative, strengths-based format which helped generate a positive momentum for the discussion.

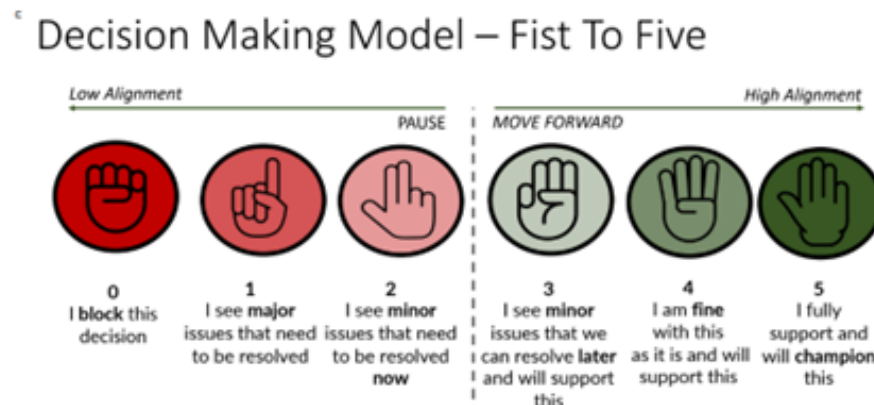
A core tenet of regenerative systems is that all parts are interconnected and are mutually dependent.

3. Interdependence

A core tenet of regenerative systems is that all parts are interconnected and are mutually dependent. The project intentionally fostered relationship-building across silos, emphasizing trust, transparency, and reciprocity. The resulting

“web of relationships” helped shift the culture of the compostables industry from competition and fragmentation toward cooperation and co-creation.

Figure 2. Participatory decision-making model ‘Fist to Five’



Because this work constituted a steering committee of leaders from across thirty-five different organizations, there was no clear hierarchy that influenced decision making or power. Leaders learned how to use a participatory decision-making framework that was built to generate alignment. The “fist to five” scale was introduced in both steering committee meetings and during the large-group event and enabled decisions to be sourced from the collective, versus from a single decision maker.



4. Adaptive and evolutionary design

Rather than predetermining outcomes, the project used flexible, emergent processes that allowed strategies to evolve in real time. The Future Search event was structured around adaptive group work – mixing small-group dialogue with whole-group synthesis – so that the collective intelligence of the system could emerge through interaction. This approach not only surfaced breakthrough ideas but also cultivated a shared sense of ownership and agility.

Discovering a shared history

Working together, the authors, Candy and Arielle, adapted the traditional Future Search model to bring the insights shared during the discovery workshops into the large-group meeting to honor the high degree of complexity in the system. They also experimented with using a live-voting tool (Mentimeter) to generate a visible experience of consensus-building. These adaptations helped the participants align faster and with confidence.

5. Nodal influence

In complex systems, small, well-placed interventions can catalyze large-scale change. The initiative identified and activated “nodal points”, where influence could radiate throughout the ecosystem, such as improving labeling standards,

aligning certification practices, or creating a national education campaign. Many of these nodal actions surfaced in the strategic priorities, as they are intended to generate ripple effects, reinforcing systemic coherence and reciprocity across the industry.



Discovering trans-org strengths and opportunities

Outcomes and priorities

The three-day Future Search provided an opportunity for people from across a complex, traditionally siloed system to practice interacting together as a larger interconnected whole, and experience what was possible when cross-sector communication and collaboration were core operating principles. In this context, event participants co-created the identification of ten strategic priorities to improve circularity of compostables and compost in the US.

After the event, a new activation steering committee was formed to guide and support a newly inspired collaborative network of stakeholders through a whole-system framework for the advancement of these ten strategic priorities.

Key learnings

Trust and transparency are at the center of bringing people into a regenerative, whole-system mindset successfully. This work embodies the possibility of a “go-slow-to-go-fast” approach, but to accomplish this meant convincing very busy senior-level thought and industry leaders that traditional top-down problem-solving would not manifest the system-wide change they were seeking. Building trust was essential and required a) being explicit about *why* a regenerative system change approach would offer more powerful and resourced solutions, and b) holding enough structure and guidance so individuals knew *how* to engage effectively.

In truth, most strategic planning efforts are done over months, sometimes years, of multi-hour planning meetings. In this model, time is spent getting the right people in the room and building cross-sectional context so that, ultimately, representatives of the whole system are able to spend three efficient, action-packed days finding common ground and developing strategies that align with the future they want.

Conclusions

The *Improving the Circularity of Compostables + Compost* initiative demonstrates that regenerative systems change is not only possible but essential in addressing today's complex environmental challenges. By bringing together a fragmented industry and aligning it around a shared vision and set of priorities, this



Using Mentimeter for strategic alignment

initiative has laid the foundation for a more resilient, inclusive, and ecologically circular US composting system.

Rather than focusing on what's broken, the project emphasized what's possible – leveraging diversity, fostering interdependence, and catalyzing change from within. The result is a roadmap not just for compostable packaging, but for the future of circular, regenerative materials management in the United States.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

You Tube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@ImprovingtheCircularity>

Public Working Folder: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1OySLafMo_wWEHZs6OEbnWX7Zsfbag-Qz?usp=drive_link

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Uncovering Place Potential

Using Appreciative Inquiry and 'Storying Place' for Regenerative Real Estate Projects

As green building practices prove insufficient amid accelerating ecological crises, this paper explores how Appreciative Inquiry and 'Storying Place' can guide regenerative real estate outcomes. Through the case of Playa Viva, we show how aligning with local ecological and cultural assets fosters development that is life-enhancing, context-responsive, and economically resilient.

From sustainability to regeneration

We are no longer in a safe operating space for humanity. According to the Stockholm Resilience Institute, six of the nine planetary boundaries have been transgressed (Steffen, 2023). The planet is a living system, and all nine boundaries are interconnected – an alteration in one causes an effect in the others, accelerating planetary destabilization.

As companies look to do their part in addressing environmental, social, and governance topics, real estate is a significant part of the equation for any company. Buildings and construction consume around 32% of global energy and contribute to about 34% of global carbon emissions, defined as including materials [embodied carbon] and in-use energy [operational carbon] (United Nations Environment Programme, 2025).

While the climate crisis deepens, conventional "green" building practices are falling short of the transformative change required to restore planetary equilibrium. Buildings have many environmental impacts, which have led to the emergence of the green building movement, characterized by the rise in green building certifications such as LEED or BREEAM, which seek to reduce the negative ecological impacts of real estate. These certifications aim to make buildings "less bad", reducing energy consumption, water use, and carbon footprints. But "less bad" is no longer enough. Today, with biodiversity

collapsing, climate health deteriorating, and an increased understanding of our world as a complex living system, we must move beyond minimizing harm.

Defining regenerative real estate

The impacts of urban development – both harmful and regenerative – are increasingly clear. With intention and ecological awareness, it is possible to build within the safe limits of Earth's biophysical systems (Arup, 2021). This, however, requires a shift from sustainable to regenerative thinking – approaches that actively restore ecosystems, support biodiversity, and revitalize communities.

The Living Building Challenge envisions buildings functioning like flowers: responsive to place, self-sufficient in energy and water, and beautiful and efficient by design. In this vision, buildings contribute to – not extract from – the ecosystems they exist in.

The regenerative approach seeks to not only create projects that are 'debt-free' but to pay down this global debt by restoring what has been borrowed from the future.

Buckminster Fuller coined the term “spaceship Earth” in the 1960s to illustrate that there is no “away”, and externalities are debt, an idea reiterated in the seminal: *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). The regenerative approach seeks to not only create projects that are “debt-free”, but to pay down this global debt by restoring what has been borrowed from the future.

Regenerative real estate, as we define it, aims to enhance the vitality and viability of socio-ecological systems through place-specific, life-supporting design. It is a paradigm shift – from buildings as static objects to buildings as participants in living systems.

Revitalizing green building through Appreciative Inquiry

This year marks the 30th consecutive COP (Conference of the Parties), where world leaders convene to address global climate cooperation. Yet, professionals in sustainability – including green building practitioners – increasingly report burnout and disillusionment in the face of limited progress (Bird et al., 2024). In the built environment, this manifests as a drift toward standardized checklists and certification systems, which often sideline place-sourced, integrative design in favor of perceived efficiency and predictable financial returns.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers an alternative: a strengths-based approach that shifts the focus from problems and past failures to identifying what gives life, envisioning what could be, and co-creating what will be. The momentum generated by this approach fosters deeper engagement and often uncovers

Storying Place ... aims to reconnect communities and stakeholders with the uniqueness of the places they inhabit.

What sets the SP process apart is that it is not place-based but place-sourced.

novel, context-specific solutions. Unlike costly tech add-ons, AI reveals key synergies early, enabling innovation to emerge organically as part of a coherent vision.

Storying Place: Partnering with place and working with potential

Storying Place (SP), developed by the Regenesi Institute (Mang et al., 2013), aims to reconnect communities and stakeholders with the uniqueness of the places they inhabit. It taps into the native genius or *genius loci* and people's creativity to understand the evolutionary patterns and the potential present in their places. This approach allows planners, governing bodies, businesses, and real estate developers to tap into the potency of places as living systems and harmonize their projects with place.

Since the beginning of our industrial era, places have been losing their distinctiveness through commodification, making them increasingly homogenized, turning "every place into no place in particular" (Kunstler, 1994). SP offers an alternative by shifting from "I'm going to do something to this place" to "I am going to give this place what it needs". In this paradigm, the site becomes a teacher, not a blank slate. The process activates belonging, shared purpose, and care – catalyzing collaboration across divides and mobilizing the energy needed to face complex, systemic challenges together.

Using Appreciative Inquiry when Storying Place

Regenerative buildings and man-made landscapes are always developed in the context of place, but what sets the SP process apart is that it is not place-based but place-sourced. The term "place-based" is more common and refers to an activity or project that is tied to a place and relevant to it. Place-sourced is about discerning a vocation of place. For human beings, vocation provides a source of meaning. A collective vocation of place provides a unifying context for people to pursue a shared purpose and be inspired to take action toward a sustainable future suited to the unique character of a place (Mang, 2013).

Storying Place and AI are grounded in the same principles: they are both strengths-focused, collaborative, inclusive, and both use positive framing, and work with constructive change. We therefore believe AI provides a powerful facilitation methodology that enables collective discovery, visioning, and co-design, which are core processes within SP. Applied together, they help communities and stakeholders explore the unique essence and potential of a place. Figure 1 illustrates how the authors propose to use AI and SP together in a real estate project.

Figure 1. Integrating the 5D phases in the Storying Place process

Courtesy of Lenna Lockwood and Emmanuel Pauwels

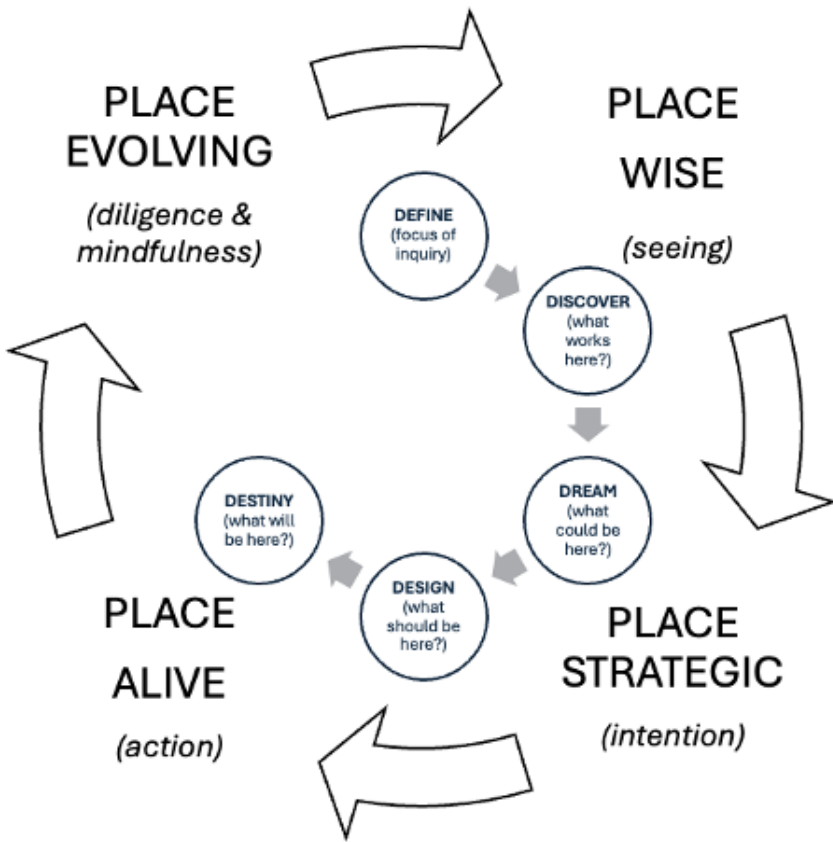


Figure 2. Sample generative questions for each phase

Courtesy of Lenna Lockwood and Emmanuel Pauwels

Real Estate Project Phase Using Integrative Design Methodology (ANSI Standard)	Appreciative Inquiry Step	Storying of Place Phase	Sample questions
Discovery	Define	Place Wise Place Strategic	Real estate development that contributes to life.
	Discover		What makes this place uniquely significant and perhaps different than all other places on earth?
			What were previous life-affirming qualities and uses of this place?
			How does this place contribute to the larger whole (community, region, etc.)?
			What do people love about this place? What are peak moments, stories, memories here?
			When have you been in a place that contributed to life? What was that experience like?
			What are the local resources : material, ecosystem, human, social?
Design	Dream		What is this place capable of becoming?
			What is the highest order value for this place?
			What would we see, hear, taste, touch, feel if all the things we identified during the Discover phase became the norm, were realized or restored?
			What does the full expression of this place's discovered potential look like?
		How would people who work here, live here, visit here feel if this place were able to live its vocation?	
Construction	Design	Place Alive	What physical and stakeholder systems are needed to bring this project into existence?
			What capabilities or capacities need to be grown to develop this compelling future ?
			What are the action or initiatives, small or large, that will make this dream a reality?
Operations and Maintenance	Destiny	Place Evolving	What have we learned?
			What do we appreciate most about what we have done?
			What systems will allow us to sustain what we have built and continue to thrive?
			What feedback loops would be useful?

Figure 2 provides some sample generative questions, adding in the notion of design phases.

Applying AI and SP together: A study of Playa Viva

Playa Viva, a luxury eco-resort on 200 acres near Juluchuca on Mexico's Pacific Coast, is an example of a regenerative project where SP was foundational in the definition of the project, allowing us to get a sense of how AI and SP could work together (see Figure 3). The site's rich ecology – beachfront, mangroves, freshwater springs, forest – and cultural heritage, including pre-Columbian ruins, had been degraded by deforestation, cattle grazing, and water mismanagement. Collaborating with the Regenes Group, the project shifted from conventional development to regeneration, restoring the landscape and engaging local communities. Today, Playa Viva is more than a resort – it is a living system designed to evolve in service to the long-term ecological and social vitality of its surrounding region.

Bamboo tree houses on the Playa Viva beachfront
Image provided by Playa Viva



Defining the *genius loci*

Playa Viva began with a realization that the degraded 200-acre abandoned palm plantation and the declining village of Juluchuca needed regeneration, not just conservation. Instead of framing this as a problem (e.g. land degradation, struggling village economy), the focus shifted to a positive possibility: healing systems.

The project was reframed from a hospitality development to a regenerative development aiming to bring new life to a depleted watershed, catalyze community resilience, and restore the vitality of the landscape.

Through the SP process, they uncovered a layered and dynamic narrative.

Discovering the uniqueness of a place

Before any designs were drawn, the Playa Viva team engaged in a deep process of inquiry to understand the essence of place. This involved exploring its geological story, ecological patterns, cultural history, and socio-economic conditions. Through the SP process, they uncovered a layered and dynamic narrative, discerning the unique nature of the place as a complex, dynamic living system. This involved reaching out to those with knowledge of its history, including elders and indigenous people, and recording their stories. For instance, the project uncovered a rich and largely forgotten Aztec history of Juluchuca.

Imagining manifested potential

Playa Viva's vocation (the unique value-generating role a place can play in its broader ecological and cultural systems) emerged as: "To regenerate the vitality of the Juluchuca watershed by restoring ecological integrity, enabling community wellbeing, and serving as a model for life-affirming tourism". This is an example of "grounded visioning" in AI, where the dream is not "pie-in-the-sky", but rooted in existing strengths and the essence of the place, envisioning a future where this essence is more fully expressed. The project shifted its identity to that of a "regenerative actor within a living system". Figure 4 shows watershed restoration in action at Playa Viva.

Playa Viva volunteers

Image provided by Playa Viva



Sustaining a regenerative destiny

Playa Viva formalized its shift to long-term stewardship, establishing a core operations team trained in regenerative principles to hold the health of the entire system (ecology, community, guest experience, financial viability). They also created the Regenerative Trust, reinvesting 2% of guest contributions directly into local health, education, and conservation, embedding stewardship into the business model.

The project prioritized feedback loops and continuous learning.

The project prioritized feedback loops and continuous learning to ensure that the project evolves with changing contexts and circumstances. Emerging initiatives, such as the ReSiMar Watershed Initiative and local entrepreneurial cooperatives (e.g. artisanal salt producers), demonstrate the system's increased capacity to generate value without centralized control, signifying the vitality of the place. This reflects the continuous process of regeneration and institutionalizing the change for longevity.

Conclusions

Playa Viva demonstrates that projects emerging from an unconventional, place-sourced, and iterative process – one that is slower and less predictable than traditional real estate development – can nonetheless achieve what many in the industry consider the holy grail: long-term value creation, resilience, and protection from devaluation and obsolescence.

More than twenty years after opening, Playa Viva continues to generate increasing financial, social, and ecological value for its investors, guests, employees, and the local community. Its regenerative mindset is not a static model or certification target, but a living system approach – constantly evolving in response to changing environmental, social, and economic conditions. This capacity to adapt and integrate across systems is the foundation of true resilience.

Projects that foster deep community connection, vitality, and regenerative capacity are far better positioned to avoid becoming stranded assets.

What may initially have seemed idealistic is increasingly becoming central to institutional investment frameworks. Projects that foster deep community connection, vitality, and regenerative capacity are far better positioned to avoid becoming stranded assets. In this light, regenerative real estate is not only ethically compelling – it is also a sound long-term investment strategy, rooted in the understanding that thriving places are those that are loved, stewarded, and resilient by design.

The endeavor of saving the planet is daunting, but the aspiration to save a place is tangible and nurtures hope. At the scale of place, we can see our positive

'What is good right now, right here?'

impacts and taste the fruits of our labor, an experience that gives us the life-force to continue our quest to contribute. When we feel frustrated by how slow the shift in consciousness feels, when we grieve for the world, we can ask ourselves appreciative questions: "What is good right now, right here? What seeds can I plant, nurture, and enjoy? With whom can I share them?"

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Regenerative Entrepreneurship

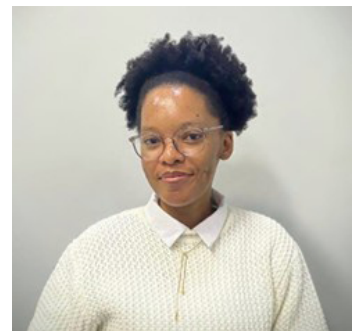
How Rosy Khonkobe Leverages Her Personal Strengths to Address Social, Economic, and Educational Challenges in Her Community

This article explores how Refilwe Rosy Khonkobe, a South African entrepreneur, leverages her personal strengths to address social, economic, and educational challenges in her community. By practising regenerative entrepreneurship, Rosy promotes sustainable growth, empowerment, and inclusivity. Drawing on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology, this study identifies key strengths that drive her success and highlights her impact on both individual lives and the broader community.

Women face persistent barriers in business, including gender bias and limited access to resources (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2021). Entrepreneurship is an opportunity for women to escape workplace bias and uplift their community. This study explores how personal strengths can drive regenerative entrepreneurship.

Regenerative entrepreneurship is the integration of entrepreneurship and regenerative business practices. Rosy's journey is a powerful example of how business practices rooted in community and purpose can address challenges such as educational access, digital inclusion, and youth unemployment.

The research also contributes to the growing scholarship related to women's entrepreneurship and highlights the value of AI in identifying and amplifying strengths that lead to transformative, community-driven outcomes. Rosy's work presents a scalable model of strengths-based regenerative entrepreneurship with relevance for other underserved communities.

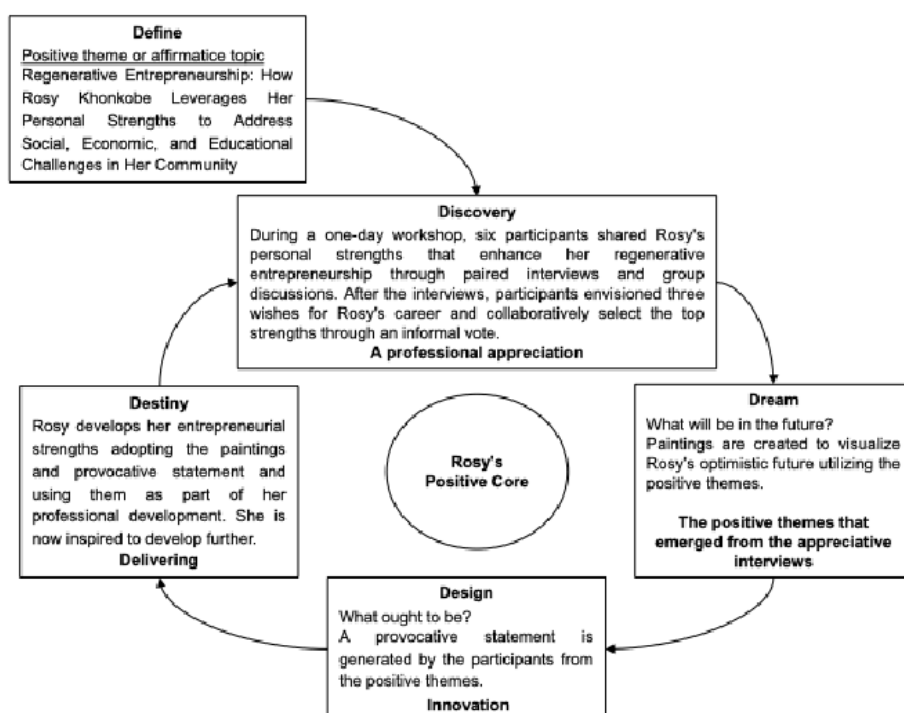


Refilwe Rosy Khonkobe
Photo courtesy of Siyanda Shandu

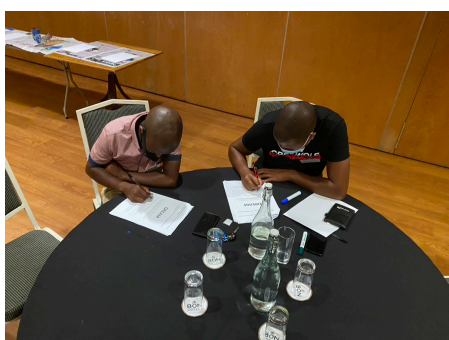
Methodology

Six participants, including mentees, customers, and colleagues, shared personal stories and their experiences of Rosy's entrepreneurial impact during a 5D AI workshop. Their narratives revealed the core strengths, values, and practices that define her approach, demonstrating how she empowers individuals, fosters community growth, and creates long-term socio-economic change.

Figure 1. The 5D AI model used in this study (adapted from Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2020)



Research findings



The participants conducted appreciative interviews in pairs.

Photo courtesy of Jannie Pretorius

In the 5D AI workshop, five key personal strengths were identified as central to Rosy's regenerative entrepreneurial success. These characteristics highlight her strengths and offer practical insights into fostering regenerative business practices.

- 1. Passion and preparedness** Rosy's passion and readiness are fundamental to her entrepreneurial journey. Passion turns interests into businesses (Discua Cruz & Halliday, 2020). Preparedness strengthens resilience during challenges. These qualities help her seize opportunities and support others.
- 2. Facilitation skills** Effective facilitation is crucial for success. Rosy's ability to lead programs such as youth education events showcases her

skill in organizing and engaging communities.

3. **Energy and loyalty** Rosy's high energy and loyalty foster strong relationships and boost productivity (Butt et al., 2020), contributing to her entrepreneurial growth and impact on her community.
4. **Selflessness and humility** These traits help Rosy prioritize her community's needs, building trust and long-term support (Roundy & Lyons, 2022).
5. **Marketing skills** Rosy's marketing skills enhance her business growth, enabling her to adapt to consumer behaviour changes (Ayiku & Grant, 2021). These skills remain a critical asset for her continued success.

Regenerative business practices: Interventions that drive change



The participants painted positive images of their desired future for Rosy's entrepreneurial career inspired by the five positive themes identified.
Photo courtesy of Jannie Pretorius

Rooted in her experience as a Black woman overcoming apartheid-era inequalities, Rosy's entrepreneurial initiatives apply the following regenerative business practices to address pressing social, economic, and educational challenges within her community.

- **Education access and digital inclusion**

Rosy facilitates university and scholarship applications for students, ensuring that financial constraints do not prevent access to education. Additionally, she works to bridge the digital divide by providing essential digital resources to individuals lacking internet access. This enables greater access to education and employment opportunities, addressing the challenge of limited resources for many in her community.

- **Supporting vulnerable groups**

Rosy actively assists elderly individuals with financial management, fostering financial resilience and long-term stability for one of the most vulnerable community demographics. This addresses the challenge faced by elderly people, who are often excluded from financial literacy programs and support systems.

- **Entrepreneurial growth and employment**

To combat youth unemployment, Rosy offers career services like CV writing, and business registration and job application assistance. She also provides marketing support to local businesses, fostering entrepreneurial growth and helping create sustainable livelihoods for community members.

- **Skill development and youth empowerment**

Rosy prioritizes youth empowerment by providing technical skills training, such as drone technology, which equips young people with future-proof skills for sustainable career paths. This helps address gaps in career guidance and offers opportunities for youth to pursue meaningful work, preventing potential dropouts and providing them with a pathway to self-sufficiency.

- **Community impact and social capital**

Rosy's initiatives create long-term solutions that promote self-sufficiency and build social capital, ensuring that her community thrives through sustainable development rather than relying on short-term aid. These efforts help address the economic and social challenges facing her community, creating a foundation for continued growth and development.

Outcomes and impact

Research outcomes:

Increased self-confidence

Community empowerment

Community uplift

The research into Rosy's entrepreneurial journey revealed several key outcomes:

- **Increased self-confidence** The 5D AI workshop confirmed Rosy's core strengths, 100% of which aligned with her regenerative practices. It boosted Rosy's confidence, reinforcing her commitment to expanding her influence and impact. On a scale of 1 to 10, Rosy reported an increase in her confidence level from 6 to 9.
- **Community empowerment** In education and skills development, Rosy's work empowered individuals in her community, inspiring them to pursue education and entrepreneurship, fostering a culture of self-empowerment. Of those Rosy supported with job applications, 66% successfully secured employment.

- **Community uplift** Her work has improved access to resources and business opportunities, enabling local entrepreneurs to flourish, and creating sustainable pathways for economic development. She has facilitated connections between over 100 aspiring entrepreneurs and major companies in South Africa, leading to valuable employment opportunities. Additionally, 100% of the elderly individuals she supported reported increased confidence and a sense of empowerment due to the transparency and clarity provided during financial audits of their records.

These outcomes highlight the transformative power of regenerative entrepreneurship and the significant role Rosy plays in her community's development.

Reflections: Rosy and her community: A fusion of strengths for sustainable impact

In the course of the AI workshop, participants reflected on how Rosy's entrepreneurial journey exemplifies a powerful fusion of personal strengths and the supportive fabric of her community, which together have led to meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

The reciprocal relationship between Rosy and her community fosters an ecosystem where both individual capability and collective purpose drive sustainable change.

The reciprocal relationship between Rosy and her community fosters an ecosystem where both individual capability and collective purpose drive sustainable change. The community, in turn, offers inspiration, context, and purpose for her work. This mutual reinforcement has enabled Rosy not only to rise above personal challenges but also to design solutions deeply aligned with the community's needs.

These reflections from the AI process underscore how, when individual capability is interwoven with collective purpose, regenerative business practices become a vehicle for empowerment, transformation, and long-term change.

Conclusion

Rosy's journey demonstrates the power of strengths-based, regenerative business practices in fostering sustainable change. Her work bridges personal resilience and collective empowerment, offering a scalable model for a fusion of strengths for sustainable impact.

Her story affirms the transformative potential of purpose-led regenerative entrepreneurship in underserved communities and provides a blueprint for others seeking to create meaningful social change.

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Uniting for Mara

Regenerative Partnerships in Action

Regenerative business practices can address climate change, tourism growth, and industrial expansion in regions like the Maasai Mara in Kenya. By prioritizing relationships among communities, businesses, and nature, these strategies support traditional lifestyles, empower women, restore ecosystems, and boost responsible tourism. Businesses benefit through stronger brand loyalty, relational capital, and resilience, fostering shared value and innovation in a rapidly changing world.

The Uniting for Mara story highlights the importance of relationship building as a regenerative business practice and demonstrates the transformative potential of partnerships. The key question driving this initiative is: how can partnerships regenerate both communities and ecosystems from within? What began as an innovative alliance between William James College in Massachusetts, USA and Procter & Gamble's (P&G) nonprofit Children's Safe Drinking Water (CSDW) program, aimed at distributing water purification packets to communities in the Mara in Kenya, has grown into a dynamic network of collaboration. Ultimately, the initiative included Accor/Fairmont Hospitality, Community Health Partners Kenya, Mara North Conservancy, the Solar Electric Light Fund, Women First International, and the Konema Women's Group.

This initiative strengthens the social responsibility platforms of P&G/CSDW and Accor/Fairmont, building consumer trust and brand loyalty at a time when customers value sustainability and social impact. In the Maasai Mara – a unique ecosystem where communities, tourism, and wildlife intersect – sustaining coexistence amid growing pressures relies on relational resources. Regenerative business nurtures these connections with authenticity, intentionality, and respect, forming a foundation for lasting impact.

Businesses that invest in relational assets – like trust, mutual respect, and shared value – thrive in dynamic environments by normalizing dialogue and aligning profit with stakeholder goals. Effective cross-sector collaboration, especially when indigenous voices are included, enhances resilience and



Left: A contaminated stream before the program

Right: Gathering the only water available

It's about 'knowing your place in the circle' – sometimes stepping forward, sometimes stepping back.



Click image to watch video

drives economic, ecological, and community success (Díaz-Meneses & Nieves, 2019; Shrestha & L'Espoir Decosta, 2024). In the Maasai Mara, this approach has led to clean water access, women's empowerment, and natural resource conservation, benefiting local wellbeing, eco-tourism, and brand loyalty. With African tourism projected to generate \$168 billion and 18 million jobs over the next decade (World Travel & Tourism Council, n.d.), meaningful community involvement is key to fostering sustainable, regenerative tourism that cultivates brand loyalty as well as supporting community success.

The power of regenerative partnerships

By prioritizing cross-stakeholder relationships, the regenerative partnership model aligns business success with community wellbeing and environmental stewardship – contributing to the collective strength and sustainability of the entire ecosystem. Such partnerships are built on trust, shared leadership, and deep listening.

In the Maasai Mara, where priorities range from tourism to pastoralism, this model values humility, patience, and local voice. As partners say, it's about "knowing your place in the circle" – sometimes stepping forward, sometimes stepping back. Like circular business models that design for sustainability, regenerative partnerships structure relationships for long-term resilience. When trust and agency grow, so does engagement, driving collective action for people, planet, and shared prosperity (Fialkov et al., 2015; 2022).

Clean water

Our story begins with clean water. William James College, a USA-based institution with a program in global mental health, originally partnered with Procter & Gamble and the Children's Safe Drinking Water Fund to address health challenges associated with unsafe water. Together with Community Health Partners, the region's largest non-governmental healthcare provider, and Accor/Fairmont Hotels, a leader in sustainable tourism, the team introduced P&G's water purification technology, which eliminates 99.99% of disease-causing organisms.



After the clean water installation

The results were immediate: improved health outcomes, reduced waterborne disease, and increased trust between stakeholders. Uniting for Mara has served over 18,000 individuals and distributed more than 1.6 million water purification packets. Over time, the effort expanded to include borehole construction, spring revitalization, and piped water infrastructure, reversing a troubling trend in Narok County, where access to piped water was just 4.6% in 2022 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2025).

Powering change with clean energy



Solar panels were installed for water pumps, lighting, and cooking stoves.

Recognizing the intersection between water access and the need for solar-powered pumps, Fairmont Hotels partnered with the Solar Electric Light Fund (SELF). They joined an initiative to bring solar-powered lights and cooking stoves to the community. These technologies reduce reliance on hazardous fuels and open fires, thereby improving family health and environmental outcomes. SELF and Fairmont also plan to install solar-powered water pumps, including one that will serve a rare rhinoceros sanctuary. These innovations directly support the UN's sustainable development goal number 7, which aims to ensure access to affordable and clean energy for all.

Stewarding the land together

Spanning over 600 square miles, the Maasai Mara ecosystem is both a natural wonder and a complex social landscape. The region is home to fifteen conservancies, over 175 tourism lodges, and vast tracts of Maasai-owned rangeland. In this context, land stewardship is both ecological and cultural. The Maasai, who have lived there for generations, partnered with conservancies and tourism operators to protect the land while sustaining their livelihoods.

Innovative lease agreements provide income for landowners while preserving critical habitats. Yet these partnerships are not without friction. In one case, a women's goat farming initiative clashed with conservation goals due to concerns over overgrazing. After a community debate, a hallmark of Maasai decision-making, the women shifted their breeding to include heifers, aligning their enterprise with environmental guidelines. The compromise prioritized relationships and restored harmony, and underscored the importance of culturally rooted conflict resolution.

Elevating women as leaders

In the Mara, the average woman walks four miles a day, up to four hours, to collect water. This time burden limits educational and economic opportunities. Regenerative practices challenge this inequity. To improve this situation,

Women are no longer seen solely as water carriers but are emerging as water protectors, policy influencers, and change-makers.

philanthropic organizations like Women First International joined the initiative, funding the Konema Women's Group to build economic independence and advocate for water governance roles.

Today, women in the group operate successfully to breed and raise livestock, particularly goats and cattle, and are preparing to take seats on Kenya's Water Resource Management Authority. Women are no longer seen solely as water carriers but are emerging as water protectors, policy influencers, and change-makers. Consequently, the relationship women have to the broader economic landscape is more respected.

Tourism that builds community

Local tourism industry leaders, such as Fairmont's Safari Club, support communities in the Mara through initiatives like safari-guide training, internships for local youth interested in working in the hospitality sector, introducing beekeeping to local communities, and supporting local breeders by purchasing their livestock for consumption. Stephen Keriga, lodge manager at the Safari Club, explains:

We live as integrated groups of different entities; we work together to attain different goals. We at Fairmont/Accor, our main goal is to live in communities, and when we live in these communities, we tend to grow communities, leaving a positive impact to every community that we live in. We desire to get different collaborators to encompass their skills, their knowledge, and expertise to better the lives of their communities in the end. And the collaboration we have had with Fairmont, William James College, and P&G has been very important to me and the members of the community here.

There are competing goals among these participants, yet they collaborate to achieve them.

This description of working in integrated groups involving different entities captures the intention and spirit of interconnectedness. He notes that there are competing goals among these participants, yet they collaborate to achieve them. This perspective reflects a tolerance for diversity and the trust necessary to recognize that someone else's goal, even if it competes with your own, may ultimately benefit the ecosystem. His words reflect the philosophy behind Uniting for Mara: not forcing uniformity but for embracing interdependence.

A strong, well-structured business enterprise is also essential for effective ecosystem preservation in the Mara. The Fairmont Safari Club is part of a diverse and influential global enterprise, led by Rahul Chaudhary, managing director and CEO of CG Corp Global and CG Hospitality, a leader committed to sustainability and long-term impact. Chaudhary has compellingly articulated their mission, stating:

We don't just see ourselves as hoteliers alone – we see ourselves as catalysts for regional-global growth.
Chaudhary

We don't just see ourselves as hoteliers alone – we see ourselves as catalysts for regional-global growth. With a strong focus on sustainable hospitality ... we're committed to shaping the future of the industry. The road ahead is ambitious, but with the right alliances and an unwavering sense of purpose, we're ready to scale new heights.
Chaudhary, 2025

This forward-thinking approach underscores the organization's dedication to excellent customer experiences, environmental stewardship, and community development.

Rooted in relationship: Lessons in regenerative partnerships

Enduring change grows from within: it is not imposed; it is invited.

In the face of mounting challenges, from climate change to resource scarcity, *Uniting for Mara* is a tale of regeneration, not just of land and water, but also of agency, equity, and hope. It serves as a lesson about the possibilities that arise when we reimagine development as a relationship, and partnership as a practice. The journey begins with a profound shift from seeing communities as passive recipients of aid to recognizing them as co-creators of solutions. Grounded in the work of Fialkov et al. (2015) and Fialkov & Haddad (2022), this approach acknowledges that enduring change grows from within: it is not imposed; it is invited.

Regenerative partnerships prioritize the inherent strengths of individuals and communities. They adopt a slow, attentive approach, fostering trust over time. This trust becomes the very essence of their work, not merely a means to an end. One of the most powerful lessons learned from this model is that process matters as much as outcome. In conventional frameworks, the focus often rests on efficiency, deliverables, and timelines.

Regenerative work ... is deeply relational. Success depends on building trust, honoring process, and nurturing long-term commitment.

Regenerative work challenges this mindset by recognizing that true transformation is neither quick nor transactional: it is deeply relational. Success depends on building trust, honoring process, and nurturing long-term commitment. It invites us to ask: Who is at the table? Whose voices are truly heard? Whose wisdom is guiding the journey? *Uniting for Mara* demonstrates that sustainability must be designed into the system from the start, not added as an afterthought. This includes designing with longevity and resilience in mind, ensuring that initiatives are not only ecologically sound but socially rooted.

There is a humility required in this work. It asks us to relinquish control, to listen more than we speak, and to see value in ways that defy Western measures of success. From this place, a different kind of innovation emerges – one that is

inclusive and regenerative. One where human flourishing and ecological healing are not separate goals, but interconnected outcomes. Perhaps the greatest wisdom in this approach is its recognition that we are not separate from one another, or from the earth. In honoring relationship as the core currency of change, regenerative partnerships call us back to the African notion of ubuntu: that the health of one is bound up with the health of all.

Conclusion

This story serves as a lesson about the possibilities that arise when we reimagine development as a relationship and regenerative partnership as a practice. The Maasai Mara region in Kenya offers a rich setting to explore the connections between business, indigenous communities, and environmental stewardship. It highlights how regenerative business practices can create economic value while preserving culture and nature. By centering community engagement and collaboration, businesses can foster inclusive development and long-term resilience. These strategies empower local communities, honoring their traditions and promoting co-created, sustainable solutions.

Women celebrating the new water source in Maasai Mara: Creating economic value while preserving culture and nature.



Philanthropic partners also play a vital role in this ecosystem. In areas like the Maasai Mara, where innovation is essential and resources are limited, philanthropy enhances development efforts. Giloth (2017) describes generative philanthropy as rooted in adaptive learning, shared goals, and collaboration – principles that guide initiatives like Uniting for Mara. These values-based efforts build trust, demonstrate impact, and attract ongoing support. Ultimately, regenerative approaches that align business, community, and philanthropy around sustainability and equity can drive transformational

The Maasai Mara shows what's possible when diverse stakeholders work together.

change. The Maasai Mara shows what's possible when diverse stakeholders work together, improving lives, protecting biodiversity, and offering a compelling model for a future where people and the planet thrive together.

Note: The authors used Grammarly, v 1.117.0 to ensure the grammatical consistency of this article.

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Beyond the Scorecard

How B Corp Certification Amplifies Business's Role in Regenerating Communities

This article explores how B Corp's updated certification standards align with regenerative business practices and Appreciative Inquiry. It highlights the role of small and medium-sized enterprises in leveraging their strengths to drive community-centered impact. By reframing certification as a process of appreciative organizational development, the article illustrates how businesses can embed purpose, equity, and systems regeneration into daily operations.

B Corp certification is experiencing record growth, with almost 10,000 companies certified globally as of 2025 (B Corporation, 2025b). First launched in 2006, [B Corp](#) has steadily expanded from a grassroots movement into a globally recognized standard for responsible business, with adoption accelerating in recent years across a diverse range of industries and geographies.

As momentum continues to build, [B Lab](#), the nonprofit organization that oversees B Corp certification, has introduced a significant update to the standards, signaling a deeper shift in how businesses are being asked to show up in the world. Moving beyond a score-based system, the new standards elevate regenerative impact (social, economic, and environmental) as the central aim of certification.

For the purposes of this article, regenerative business practices refer to activities that restore, renew, or revitalize interconnected social, environmental, and economic systems. These practices are often grounded in the strengths of the business and carried out in collaboration with stakeholders. This approach seeks to create mutual value across the entire ecosystem, including communities, natural systems, and the full network of individuals and organizations that contribute to and are impacted by the business. The goal is to move beyond harm reduction toward shared thriving.

This article highlights how businesses can build on their existing values and capabilities to generate meaningful, regenerative impact.

In the sections that follow, I explore how the updated B Corp standards support the use of regenerative business practices and how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can leverage this new structure to deepen their commitments, engage stakeholders, and become catalysts for systemic change. Grounded in a strengths-based approach to change, this article highlights how businesses can build on their existing values and capabilities to generate meaningful, regenerative impact.

Raising the bar: From scoring to standards

The most notable change in the revised certification process is the departure from the flexible, points-based scoring model. Instead, businesses must meet performance expectations across seven clearly defined *impact topics*:

- Purpose and stakeholder governance
- Fair work
- Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI)
- Human rights
- Climate action
- Environmental stewardship and circularity
- Collective action

Figure 1: Seven B Corp certification impact topics (B Corporation, 2025a)



The heart of regenerative business lies in co-creating mutual value between community flourishing and long-term resilience throughout the entirety of the business ecosystem.

Rather than allowing companies to accumulate points in one area while neglecting others, the new model ensures a baseline of performance across all topics. This structural change encourages businesses to take a holistic view of their operations and impacts. It sets a stronger foundation for regenerative thinking, where the aim shifts from merely minimizing harm to actively creating net-positive value for the organization itself as well as the broad ecosystem of stakeholders who depend on it.

Supporting regenerative transformation

The heart of regenerative business lies in co-creating mutual value between community flourishing and long-term resilience throughout the entirety of the business ecosystem. The updated B Corp standards reinforce these principles by requiring companies to:

- Define and operationalize a clear purpose
- Adopt legal structures that embed stakeholder governance (decision-making that accounts for the needs of all stakeholders, not just prioritization of shareholders)
- Acknowledge and address systemic risks and harms
- Build inclusive and equitable workplace and community relationships
- Take meaningful climate action and environmental responsibility (B Corporation, 2025b)

This shift aligns certification with a broader movement toward business practices that go beyond sustaining existing systems to actively restore and regenerate the ecological, social, and economic foundations on which they rely.

A strengths-based approach to change

For many businesses, especially SMEs, the path to becoming a regenerative business can feel overwhelming. Yet the new B Corp standards offer an entry point rooted in strengths. Rather than asking, “Where are we falling short?” the process encourages businesses to ask, “Where are we already strong, and how can we build from there?”

The revised B Corp standards create a powerful opportunity for businesses to engage in certification as a process of appreciative organizational development. Such a process invites a reimagining of certification not as an audit of deficits,

The revised B Corp standards create a powerful opportunity for businesses to engage in certification as a process of appreciative organizational development.

but as a generative exploration of potential rooted in what gives life to the organization at its best.

One way of operationalizing this idea is through the 4D framework of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008), wherein companies can:

- **Discover** the positive core – those existing strengths, values, and practices that already reflect a commitment to the seven impact topics found in Figure 1.
- **Dream** bold possibilities for how their business might contribute to the flourishing of organization itself as well as the broad ecosystem of stakeholders who depend on it.
- **Design** systems, strategies, and collaborations that bring these possibilities into form, aligning daily operations with the organization's highest aspirations.
- **Deliver** both agreed upon design choices and shared commitment through ongoing learning, celebration, and cycles of co-creation that deepen impact over time.

Certification serves as a catalyst for cultivating a regenerative culture from within.

Through this lens, B Corp certification becomes more than a credential; it becomes a living expression of organizational purpose, grounded in strengths and shaped by relationships, imagination, and a shared vision for a regenerative future of the community. When approached as an evolving practice rather than a fixed achievement, certification serves as a catalyst for cultivating a regenerative culture from within. It encourages continuous learning, experimentation, and collaboration, inviting businesses to align their everyday actions with long-term aspirations.

With this dynamic orientation, certification is not a static marker of past performance. It has the potential to be a forward-looking commitment refined over time through stakeholder engagement, emerging insights, and the solutions developed by enterprise to tackle the unfolding challenges and opportunities facing people and the planet. Through this lens, B Corp certification offers both a north star and a conversation, guiding organizations toward impact while keeping them attuned to the values and relationships that make regeneration possible.

SMEs ... are uniquely positioned to lead, develop, and deploy regenerative solutions.

Opportunities for SMEs

SMEs often face capacity and resource constraints, but they are uniquely positioned to lead, develop, and deploy regenerative solutions that create mutual value. SMEs tend to be more agile, deeply connected to their local communities, and mission-driven by nature.

The updated standards create space for SMEs to:

- **Engage** employees, customers, and other key stakeholders across the broader ecosystem in defining impact goals.
- **Create** governance structures that ensure transparency, invite community input, and prioritize the needs and interests of those affected by the business's decisions.
- **Implement** manageable, meaningful practices aligned with the seven impact topics.
- **Identify** and seize opportunities for community regeneration that align with the strengths and aspirations of the business.
- **Showcase** their values-aligned work with greater clarity.

By approaching certification not as an external demand but as a design challenge, SMEs can reframe the process as an opportunity for creativity, alignment, and intentional growth. This perspective invites business leaders to thoughtfully design systems, practices, and structures that reflect their values, aspirations, and commitments to regeneration. Rather than simply meeting external requirements, SMEs can use the certification journey to create a roadmap of strategic priorities, co-create a culture rooted in purpose, and deepen relationships with employees, customers, and communities through inclusive, values-driven decision-making.

Practices to support regenerative action

To make the most of the new standards, practitioners can guide businesses through the following whole-system practices:

- **Begin with Appreciative Discovery** Identify existing practices reflected in the seven impact topics (see Figure 1). Build momentum by celebrating what's working.

Use the B Impact Assessment as a free diagnostic tool.

- **Map strengths to impact areas** Use the B Impact Assessment as a free diagnostic tool to explore where the business is aligned naturally and where new energy is needed.
- **Engage in whole-system collaborative design** Involve employees, community members, and other partners to envision and achieve regenerative goals. Consider structures to make this engagement ongoing.
- **Integrate feedback and accountability** Treat assessment as a learning tool and embrace a growth mindset. View feedback not as judgment but as fuel for improvement. Track impact, reflect regularly, and communicate transparently about both progress and challenges as opportunities for continued growth and alignment.
- **Leverage certification for influence** Use the certification story to inspire other businesses, influence the supply chain, and contribute to wider systems change.

Conclusion: Regeneration as a collective journey

The updated B Corp standards are not just about raising the bar; they are an invitation to redefine the role of business in society. They invite organizations to act with courage, connection, and a proactive commitment to systemic wellbeing.

Companies can transform everyday choices into a lasting legacy.

For SMEs and all purpose-driven businesses, this is an opportunity to lead with purpose. By engaging certification as a catalyst for community-level regeneration of social, economic, and natural systems, companies can transform everyday choices into a lasting legacy. They are called to see the potential for increasing prosperity through the deeper work of becoming a force for shared flourishing and systems renewal.

Regenerative leadership begins not with a checklist, but with a question: how might we use our business to heal, restore, and create the conditions for our communities to thrive. The revised B Corp standards invite us to pursue that question in community, through action, and with purpose.

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Conversation as Catalyst for Regenerative Business

What If the Most Powerful Lever for Building a Better World Begins With a Different Kind of Conversation?

This article highlights how two Appreciative Inquiry practices – generative questions and positive framing – have catalyzed regenerative business practices in two businesses. We draw upon regenerativity and conversational architecture to show how the nature of conversations can catalyze the dynamic capability to flourish.

As the global call to action for regenerative business grows louder, urging businesses to shift from minimizing harm to actively restoring and revitalizing social, economic, and ecological systems, many businesses find themselves unsure of how to begin. While frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015) offer ambitious targets, they are less clear on the everyday practices that make regeneration possible. One accessible place to start is with our conversations.

In this article, we explore how conversations can leverage generative questions and positive framing to support regenerativity, allowing a business to effectively "(1) sense and shape opportunities and threats, (2) seize opportunities, and (3) maintain competitiveness through enhancing, combining, protecting, and when necessary, reconfiguring business enterprise's intangible and tangible assets" (Teece, 2007, p. 1319). These conversations generate both tangible (e.g. new

We define regenerativity as the capacity of a business to support flourishing in the systems it touches ... through intentional conversations worth having.

revenue streams) and intangible (e.g. social capital) value that build a better world for all, including traditional and extended stakeholders (i.e. communities, society, and the planet).

In this context, we define **regenerativity** as the capacity of a business to support flourishing in the systems it touches (social, ecological, and economic) through intentional conversations worth having. Regenerativity, unlike earlier “do-less harm” or even net-zero approaches, generates net-positive contributions. It is a mindset and operating strategy that businesses can adopt regardless of size, sector, or starting point.

We illuminate how Appreciative Inquiry (AI) principles (e.g. wholeness and social constructionism) and practices (asking generative questions and using positive framing) are supporting businesses in becoming regenerative not by chance but by intentional design.

We offer these narratives not as prescriptive models, but as inspiring examples of what becomes possible when business is approached as a conversational and relational process. As suggested by Polman and Winston (2021), businesses of the future will generate profit not by creating the world’s problems, but by solving them. Regenerative business begins with shifting the nature of conversations.

Conversation: Foundational to regenerative business

In businesses aiming for regenerative outcomes, conversations are not merely tools for communication, they are catalysts for transformation. They invite people to reimagine the very purpose and practice of business through expansive, life-affirming dialogues. The shifts unfolding in these organizations move beyond incremental change; they reflect a deep re-patterning of how to think, measure, relate, and lead. Conversations worth having are guided by generative questions, which widen the view, change the way people think and invite possibility and positive framing, which focuses on opportunities and desired outcomes.¹

As we explored generativity in current organizations, we observed a distinct shift in the nature of conversation that catalyzes regenerative business.² These

¹ To learn more on generative questions and positive framing, see “From Principles to Practice: Expanding Appreciative Inquiry with Conversations Worth Having” by Cheri Torres and Jackie Stavros in *AI Practitioner*, May 2025, 27(2), 85–88. <https://aipractitioner.com/product/from-principles-to-practice/>

² We see a key difference between traditional business models and the emerging regenerative model: the level of system engagement and the nature of our conversations. For an in-depth exploration of this concept, see our

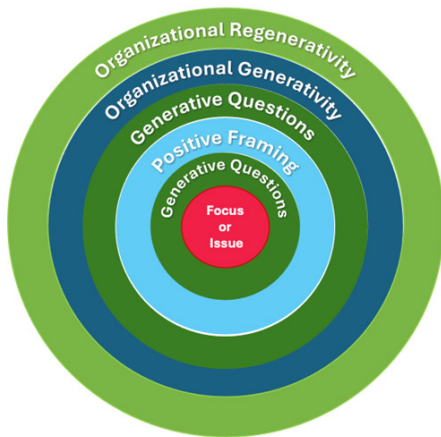


Figure 1. The power of conversations worth having to cultivate a regenerative business: it is an iterative process, where positive framing can make space for further generative questions.

conversations reflected more than operational check-ins or compliance-driven reporting; they were active, iterative, living dialogues oriented around contribution, collaboration, and co-evolution. Together, they outline a new conversational architecture, one that transforms roles, reframes success, and prioritizes the co-creation of vitality in both human and ecological communities.

A conversation worth having begins with two practices: generative questions and positive framing (see Figure 1). Begin with a business focus or issue. Then ask generative questions to clarify the topic. Continue with generative questions to establish a desired outcome. This positive frame opens space for a broader dialogue.

Generative questions around the positive frame continue to widen the view and fuel productive and meaningful engagement. This iterative process makes the invisible visible, creates shared understanding, and generates new knowledge and possibilities for action. Conversations worth having are core to organizational generativity and, ultimately, result in regenerativity.

There are numerous organizations stretching their “regenerative wings” as they host conversations in the changing arena of purpose and process. Here are two examples:

Interface:

What sparked this transformation? A conversation between engineers, designers, ecologists, and local community members stimulated by generative questions.

Interface: Factory as a forest. Interface, a company that makes commercial carpet tiles and resilient flooring, has long been recognized for its sustainability leadership, but in collaboration with [Biomimicry 3.8](#), a consulting and professional training company focusing on nature, positive design and innovation, it moved beyond sustainability into full regeneration.

Their “[factory as a forest](#)” initiative involved rethinking factory outputs using the positive frame of reducing emissions and waste while simultaneously increasing the health of natural ecosystems through carbon sequestration, biodiversity, and water filtration. What sparked this transformation? A conversation between engineers, designers, ecologists, and local community members stimulated by generative questions, such as:

- What can Interface do for the environment?
- How might our carpet manufacturing give back more than we take?

eight-article LinkedIn series on regenerative business models at Regen Capacity Building.
<https://www.conversationsworthhaving.today/regen-capacity-building>

- How can we redesign carpet so that one stain doesn't mean the whole carpet has to be replaced?
- What if our carpet reflected nature and the way she works?

The result was a shared vision that inspired design and operational changes that made ecological performance a key performance indicator. One result was a new product called I2: carpet tiles that feature random patterns and color variations inspired by the forest floor. This carpet allows for non-directional installation, creating a cohesive design regardless of how the tiles are arranged, which makes individual replacement and recycling easier (The Biomimicry Institute, n.d.). These regenerative conversations created new possibilities and realigned the organizational narrative around reciprocity with nature.

Mejuri. [Mejuri](#) has grown from an online-only business to include 50 retail stores in four countries in just eight years at a time when many luxury jewelry businesses are struggling. They have done this by reframing their business outcomes to include fine jewelry made possible by regenerative³ business practices and responsible sourcing.

Mejuri:

How can we ensure beautiful and sustainable products that minimize harmful impacts on people and the environment?

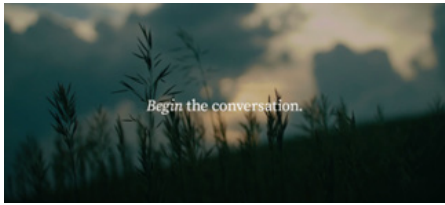
In developing their [2030 Sustainability Goals](#) in 2023 Mejuri's conversations were fueled by questions such as:

- How can we ensure beautiful and sustainable products that minimize harmful impacts on people and the environment?
- How can we support the health and wellbeing of our people?
- What can we do to make sure we ultimately have a net-positive impact on the planet?
- How might we give back to our community?

These generative questions around a new and positive frame for the way they do business inspired conversations and commitments that resulted in tangible, regenerative business practices.

According to their 2023 Sustainability Report, 94% of their gold, 95% of their silver and 100% of their platinum is now recycled and their lab-grown diamonds are 100% climate-neutral products. They became a founding partner of the [Regeneration Initiative](#), which is rehabilitating legacy mining sites and

³ Mejuri's original focus was sustainability; however, their generative conversations resulted in regenerative conversations and results.



The Regeneration Initiative's video invitation to jewelers and the mining industry: [Begin the Conversation. Begin the Collaboration](#)

restoring natural environments. In that regenerative process, precious metals are extracted from legacy mining waste – making it 100% traceable. Mejuri purchases their gold from such processes. Social and community efforts include professional development and improved healthcare, education, and family support, and entrepreneurial opportunities for women in mining communities.

Both of these projects reveal a shift from reactive management to proactive outcomes and inquiry through conversations that prioritize learning, possibility, and mutual benefit. They are not about managing change; they are about becoming change through dialogue and collective action. Leadership was not suggesting a sweeping initiative or high-level mandate to catalyze change; rather an invitation was proposed to shift from competition to collaboration, changing the conversation at the industry level.

An invitation to regenerativity: A new way of leading

Inspired by these examples, we invite you to pause and get curious about your broader positive frame and the questions you might ask to initiate your regenerative journey. Whether you're working in healthcare, education, manufacturing, agriculture, finance, or government, your conversations have the potential to catalyze regenerativity. Consider these questions:

- What gives life to the systems, relationships, and environments we work within? How might our practices amplify flourishing for all?
- If we see our business as a healing force for the world, what questions might we ask our clients, colleagues, and communities?
- What systems – ecological, social, economic – are we touching through our operations? How can we shift from extracting value to contributing value?
- What new narratives do we need to write together so that our work becomes a source of renewal rather than depletion?

Regenerativity is not a one-time initiative – it is a continuous, intentional conversation.

Regenerativity is not a one-time initiative – it is a continuous, intentional conversation. As Laurent advocates, transformational tourism requires “a new kind of leadership and mindset” (2021, p. 4). We see it as one grounded in shared purpose, curiosity, and the willingness to challenge outdated assumptions. As Laurent and her colleagues demonstrate, when we change the conversation, we change what's possible.

This new generation of regenerative leaders are asking different questions and inviting new people and perspectives into the room. They are co-creating spaces where the broader ecosystem has a seat at the table and the future is shaped through conversations worth having.

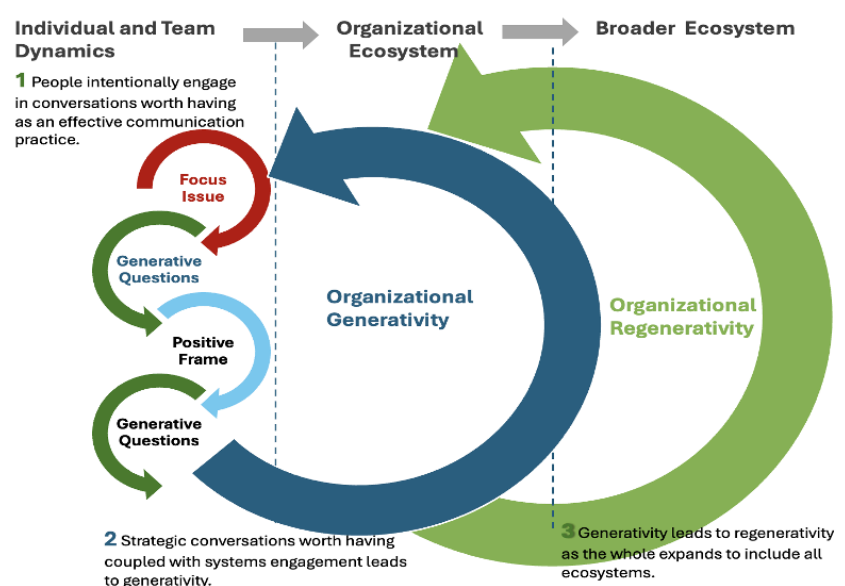
Business stories grounded in regeneration show us that long-term success is increasingly interdependent with the wellbeing of partners, communities, and the planet. Companies like Interface and Mejuri are demonstrating that regenerative design, stakeholder co-creation, and ecological reciprocity can guide business toward deeper value and relevance.

The future is conversational

When people shape business practices through conversations worth having, regenerativity becomes not only possible, but the most viable path to enduring prosperity and purpose. The stories we've shared do more than model innovation and the future; they set the stage for a paradigm shift where businesses are understood not as static structures, but as conversational processes where people engage in ongoing dialogue across their ecosystem (see Figure 2).

The transition from sustainability to regenerativity is not a checklist; it is a commitment to learning, unlearning, and reimagining. It invites humility, creativity, and courage. It challenges us to cultivate new capabilities: ecological literacy, systems thinking, cultural competence, and relational intelligence (Holliday, 2016).

Figure 2. Conversations worth having as a catalyst for regenerative business



*Each conversation opens
the doorway to new kinds of
value.*

As we continue to explore the landscape of regenerative leadership, business, and design, what is becoming clear is that it is not merely a theoretical concept. It's a living conversation unfolding in real time. From global tech companies to grassroots bio-regional stewards, we encounter practices that reveal regeneration as an active, relational conversational process. Each conversation opens the doorway to new kinds of value, rooted in purpose, participation, and place (Sanford, 2017; Holliday, 2016; Wahl, 2016).

As practitioners of AI and regenerative design, we are called to host, hold, and honor conversations that awaken potential, strengthen relationships, and co-create pathways toward thriving futures. At the heart of this work is the deliberate practice of asking generative questions and using positive framing. This shifts a business mindset from fragmentation to connection, reorienting us toward what gives life and energy for what already exists.

*Every regenerative action
began with a generative
question.*

In the examples we have shared, every regenerative action began with a generative question that invited curiosity, amplified what was working, and envisioned bold possibilities. Every regenerative business begins as a conversation worth having, one that frames and centers shared purpose, and affirms the belief that, together, we can design environments that heal, uplift, and contribute meaningfully to the wellbeing of people, place, and planet (the world around us).

Notes: To explore more stories and insights about what we are learning and our collaborative thinking of how organizations are cultivating regenerativity through conversation, we invite you to read our Generative Organizations article series. These pieces expand on the themes introduced here: <https://www.conversationsworthhaving.today/regen-capacity-building>.

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The Regenerative Action Diagram

Bridging the Gap Between Personal Values and Purposeful Action at the Business Level

The Regenerative Action Diagram is a practical, affordable, strengths-based framework that supports individuals and businesses in aligning regenerative goals with purpose, strategy, and community wellbeing. It fosters clarity, collaboration, and regenerative practice across diverse settings. The diagram is being developed as an open-source resource for practitioners, educators, and changemakers committed to building a more just and regenerative future.

The call is growing for businesses to go beyond compliance and “doing-less-harm” strategies only towards a net positive impact while honoring their owner/investor obligations. Regenerative business practices provide an avenue to achieve enterprise prosperity through the revitalization of natural, human, and economic systems in ways that support BOTH just, thriving communities, creating positive, lasting value for people, the planet, the enterprise AND traditional stakeholders (investors, customers, employees, etc.). The many possibilities arising from new collaborations between the enterprise and members of its business ecosystem can be realized if the strategy for their identification begins with explorations from within.

In the spirit of regenerative agriculture (Brown, 2018), the Regenerative Action Diagram (RAD) helps businesses cultivate and grow both meaningful and enduring action from its own “social soil”.

Why the RAD framework?

Sustainability challenges are difficult – interconnected, emergent, and urgent. Climate disruption, social inequality, resource scarcity, geo-political turmoil, and economic uncertainty impact every facet of life.

Equally challenging are:

1. The disconnection of many frameworks for regenerative action from the real motivations and lived experiences of people and organizations.
2. The lack of frameworks that can be used:
 - In multiple contexts without requiring an immediate enterprise-level application,
 - Without over-extending the resources of a business, particularly small businesses.

RAD addresses these challenges by:

Preventing paralysis

Developing a practical tool

Fostering long-term commitment

RAD addresses these challenges through:

- **Preventing paralysis** in the face of large-scale challenges by anchoring regenerative innovation and action in personal strengths, intrinsic motivation, and meaningful social and ecological priorities.
- **Developing a practical tool** that simplifies real-world use in multiple settings such as workshops, strategy sessions, and coaching engagements. This simplicity and flexibility reduces the costs that are often involved in larger, more complicated regenerative business programs.
- **Fostering long-term commitment** to regenerative change by inviting a move from compliance and deficit-based operations to cultivating internal capacity, momentum for innovation, and collective wellbeing.

As a strengths-based regenerative business practice, RAD:

1. Invites individuals and teams to engage with three core questions: What sparks my/our interest? What are my and our unique strengths? What positive impact is possible? This kind of reflection surfaces internal aspirations, capabilities, and purpose-driven intentions and builds clarity around an organization's regenerative niche.
2. Enhances creative thinking and action: As teams identify their unique contributions and aspirations, they become more capable of imagining new possibilities and mobilizing internal energy toward aligned action. This internal coherence becomes fertile ground for creative thinking and trust-based collaboration, both within the organization

and in partnership with external stakeholders.

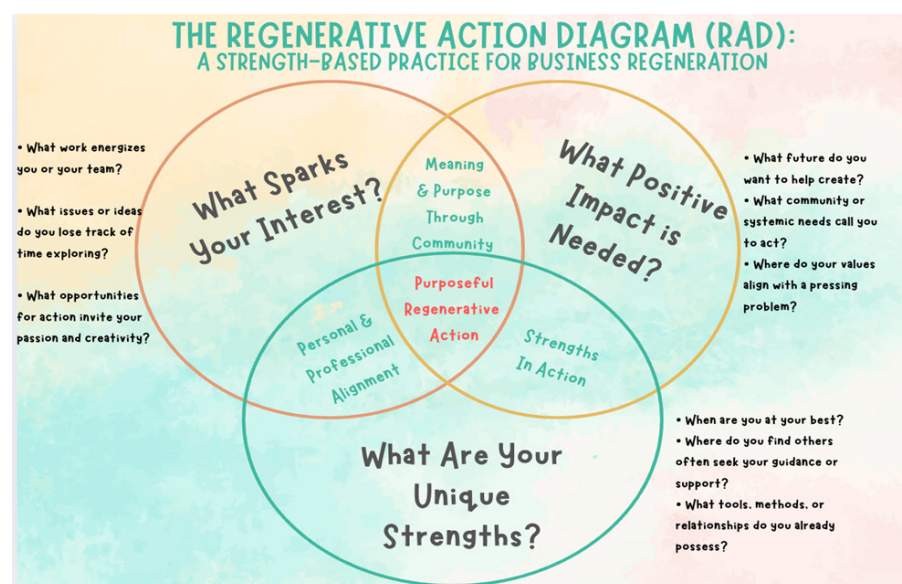
RAD offers a flexible, low investment way to get started and helps bridge the gap between values and purposeful action.

3. Encourages cross-functional dialogue through its inclusive and participatory structure, enabling teams to uncover shared interests and opportunities for synergy. This is critical for innovation and long-term, values-aligned prosperity.
4. Offers a flexible, low investment way to get started; a comprehensive business-wide approach, while useful, is not essential. Its use in single teams can reap immediate benefits.
5. Helps bridge the gap between values and purposeful action at the enterprise level by focusing on what individuals and the enterprise do best, what they most care about, and where they are most needed.
6. Expands Ayana Elizabeth Johnson's *Climate Action Venn Diagram* (2024, p. 424) to encompass broader regenerative business challenges. It is especially relevant for practitioners, facilitators, and businesses ready to drive systemic change that begins with identifying and growing internal capability, energy, and possibilities.

The Regenerative Action Diagram model

The model is universal and appropriate for use within all businesses, regardless of sector or business-specific goals. At the heart of the model are three intersecting circles guiding individuals and their organizations toward aligned and purposeful action.

Figure 1: The Regenerative Action Diagram (RAD) model (Adapted from: Johnson, 2024)



What issues in your community or elsewhere most energize you to take action?

What sparks your interest?

This area encourages reflection on personal and organizational values, sources of inspiration, and intrinsic motivations.

Prompt questions may include:

- What are the values of your organization that inspire you?
- What issues in your community or elsewhere most energize you to take action? For example, the natural environment? Economic fairness? The way some people are treated?
- What opportunities for creating positive change – whether through advocacy, design, or community engagement – ignite your passion and creativity most?

What are your unique strengths?

This area focuses on uncovering personal strengths, organizational resources, and key relationships that can be leveraged for regenerative impact. It includes technical skills, lived experience, partnerships, and existing capabilities.

Prompt questions may include:

- In what types of regenerative impact work (e.g. community building, systems thinking, hands-on restoration) do you feel most effective or fulfilled?
- Where do others turn to you for guidance in addressing challenges related to equity, environmental stewardship, or navigating complex systems?
- What practices, capabilities, or relationships does your company already bring to efforts in fostering ecological resilience, ethical change, or social inclusion?

What practices, capabilities or relationships does your company already bring?

What is our company being called to do with respect to collaborative development of social, economic, or environmental improvements?

What positive impact is possible?

This area focuses on real, urgent needs in the world – for example, biodiversity loss, supply chain justice, energy transitions, mental health access, or local food security.

Prompt questions may include:

- What is our company being called to do with respect to collaborative development of social, economic, or environmental improvements?
- What future do you/we want to help create – for your/our communities or the larger world?
- Where do your/our values and strengths align with a pressing problem in your/our community or the larger world?

Intersections of RAD

While each area is powerful alone, the impact of the RAD model is amplified where the three dimensions intersect:

Personal and professional alignment

The overlap between interests and strengths helps people align passions with capabilities, allowing for purpose-driven career and organizational pathways that are both sustainable and regenerative.

Strengths in action

This is the place where existing capabilities align with urgent challenges, allowing people to direct their energy in ways that are meaningful, sustainable and doable. By focusing on what they do well and where they are most needed, individuals and organizations can avoid overextension and maintain momentum. This balance fosters a sense of purpose, builds resilience, and encourages long-term engagement in regenerative work.

Meaning and purpose through community

When personal and organizational interests align with collective needs, a deeper sense of meaning and purpose emerges. This alignment not only fuels intrinsic motivation but also creates a natural foundation for collaboration. By working

When personal and organizational interests align with collective needs, a deeper sense of meaning and purpose emerges.

RAD is adaptable and supports business leaders, social entrepreneurs, educators, and community organizers.

Businesses have a critical role to play, not just in minimizing harm, but in actively regenerating the social, economic, and natural systems on which they depend.

together toward shared regenerative goals, individuals and organizations can build networks of trust, support, and innovation – from local partnerships to global movements – that amplify impact and sustain long-term change.

The heart of the diagram represents purposeful regenerative action, where interest, strength, and impact converge to create scalable, values-driven solutions.

Application of RAD

Designed for real-world use across a range of settings such as workshops, strategy sessions, and coaching engagements, RAD is adaptable and supports business leaders, social entrepreneurs, educators, and community organizers in exploring regeneration in whatever context makes sense.

In leadership development, it helps managers identify purpose-driven strategies and cultivate regenerative leadership cultures. In strategic planning, it supports organizations in aligning regenerative initiatives with internal strengths and external partnerships. Within education and training, it encourages emerging professionals to pursue careers that integrate personal purpose with systems change. And in community engagement, it enables cross-sector collaboration by helping stakeholders co-create inclusive solutions to complex external challenges.

With the help of facilitators, participants reflect individually and collaboratively on the three guiding questions. Facilitators then help participants to map intersections and identify meaningful commitments to action.

A more extensive facilitation guide and customizable materials are currently in development to support its broader use, with the goal of making RAD an open-source resource for practitioners, educators, and changemakers committed to building a regenerative future.

Why all this matters now

In a time of deep uncertainty about accelerating ecological, economic, and social change, businesses have a critical role to play, not just in minimizing harm, but in actively regenerating the social, economic, and natural systems on which they depend (Mohr, 2025). Meeting this moment requires more than metrics or compliance; it demands a shift toward personal and collective ownership rooted in authentic values, practical strengths, and a shared vision for a thriving future.

RAD offers a hopeful and actionable path forward – an opportunity to align who we are, what we care about, and where we can have the greatest impact.

RAD offers a hopeful and actionable path forward – an opportunity to align who we are, what we care about, and where we can have the greatest impact. Grounded in Appreciative Inquiry and human-centered design, RAD helps individuals and organizations move from analysis to action, from fragmentation to integration, and from sustainability toward regeneration.

As more businesses and communities pursue regenerative futures, tools like the RAD framework can offer clarity, focus, and inspiration – a compass that helps navigate complexity with intention, purpose, and resilience.

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Cees Hoogendijk

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Regenerative Business: A Cautionary Note

This article explores the uneasy marriage of 'regenerative' with 'business', cautioning against greenwashed intentions while honouring the longing for renewal. After examining the term's rise, exposing its risks and possibilities, it reframes the conversation, inviting deeper questions, spotlighting quiet regenerative acts, and urging a shift from performance to purpose, from buzzwords to life-giving enterprises.

Preface

Please allow me two provocations in sharing my personal views. First, I don't feel comfortable with combining the words regenerative and business. Second, in "hiring" ChatGPT as my scribe, I am aware of provoking the art of writing – including my own. From the moment I offered an inquisitive voice to this issue on regenerative business, I collected various sources to support or deny my suspicion of the term itself. I collected too much: I created four drafts. I couldn't decide between them and ran out of time. My experience with artificial intelligence encouraged me to gather 12,000 words of material and corresponding emails into one document. I also crafted an extensive prompt to instruct ChatGPT. With the exception of a few minor edits, my text below has been generated as well as co-created by artificial intelligence. I couldn't have done a better job to tell so much in so few words.

We live in curious times. Regenerative business is having its moment in the sun – solar-powered, presumably. Everyone wants to be regenerative these days: companies, consultants, even toothpaste brands. But what does it actually mean, whether or not viewed through an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) lens?

As someone whose work lives somewhere between the etymologist's dictionary, the systems theorist's drawing board, and the OD consultant's toolkit, I found myself tripping over the prefix *re-*. Regenerative, as opposed to generative. Rewind or reimagine? Apologise or anticipate?

Bernard Mohr, guest editor of this *AI Practitioner* issue, offered two essential questions that catalysed this article:

1. Are truly regenerative businesses even possible within our structurally dysfunctional and degenerative economic system? (From Daniel C. Wahl's blog [Can regenerative economics & mainstream business mix?](#))
2. How do we approach this from an Appreciative Inquiry perspective? (from Bernard Mohr, via email)

Both are excellent questions. Let's begin with a third: *What is in a prefix?* The prefix *re-* suggests returning: to rebuild, restore, recycle, reclaim. Useful verbs, certainly – but aren't they a little ... retrospective?

Generative, by contrast, is forward-facing. It comes from *generare*, to beget, to bring into being. In AI terms, it's the realm of "what gives life?", not "how do we fix what's broken?". Appreciative Inquiry is, by its very DNA, generative. It's not the mechanic under the hood or bonnet; it's the designer of the next electric vehicle. And generative implies that it is co-owned. Yet it is regenerative that is trending. Why?



The world, quite literally, is in need of regeneration. From soils to social trust, something essential has been depleted. The regenerative movement – especially in agriculture – speaks to a vital human impulse: not only to stop harming but to start healing. So why the scepticism?

Because in the hands of business, the term risks being cosmetic. Restorative semantics. Reputational first aid. We're not always sure whether regeneration is happening – or just being advertised as such.

Business: The trouble with the word

Let's pause on the word *business*, a word originally rooted in English in anxiety, care, diligence, that later morphed into commerce. Today it evokes winners, mergers, and the odd billionaire in a rocket. We say "business case" by way of justification. But what if the business case itself is the problem? Must regeneration pass through the lens of shareholder return? Can we market our way out of ecological collapse? If a company depletes a forest and plants three trees with a hashtag, is it regenerative or just ... regretful?

Even the best intentions get twisted when profit is the primary metric. Many businesses now proclaim regenerative missions. Yet when profits dip or visionary leaders leave, they abandon innovation and retreat to tax havens. Nature is not fooled. Nor should we be.

The starfish and the surgeon

A favourite metaphor of mine: the starfish. If it loses a limb, it regenerates the missing part. No outsourcing, no invoice. Just starfish life, doing what a starfish's life does. Contrast that with a surgeon replacing a knee: remarkable, yes, but not regenerative. Rather, it is restorative, using tools, training, and titanium.

So when a business “restores” ecosystems it has helped degrade and charges admission, is it behaving more like the surgeon or the starfish? Or a PR department?

True regeneration is built-in. Unprompted, self-directed. Not staged for a CSR report.

A blackout, a battery, and a question

During a widespread power outage in Spain, I found myself quite literally in the dark – no internet, no AI assistant, no fridge humming in the background. Just silence and candlelight. (And the phantom transistor radio I wished I'd bought.)

The cause? A cascade of instability in the energy grid, due in part to the increasing complexity of renewable inputs – wind, sun, and their unpredictable interaction. As it turns out, our lovely green energy isn't always so well-behaved. It fluctuates. And unlike old fossil-based systems with built-in inertia (massive, humming, and problematic), renewables need new forms of stability: smart grids, batteries, and – yes – more rare minerals.

Which leads me to ponder: can we really call it regenerative when our shiny new solutions require yet more digging into the Earth? Even recycling has its dark side. Take EV batteries. Everyone is cheering for the circular economy, but disassembling, detoxifying, and repurposing batteries is no walk in the regenerative park. It's dangerous, costly, and often outsourced to the margins of the global economy. These questions matter; not reasons to stop, but to rethink about designing: not only greener gadgets, but more equitable systems as part of the same equation.

Appreciative Inquiry: From naming to becoming

This is where AI shines: not as judge or jury, but as reframer. Instead of asking, “Is regenerative business possible?”, we might ask:

- Where do we already see regenerative logics alive in the system, however small?

What would a business ecosystem look like if truly designed to give more than it takes?

- What would a business ecosystem look like if truly designed to give more than it takes?
- Which (ge)narratives best guide us toward that future?

AI has always been more about questions than conclusions. Or, as Wahl puts it, “A shift in focus is to take questions much more seriously and be less obsessed with solutions and answers.”¹

So let’s ask better ones.

The social profit clue

Oddly, I’ve never heard city councils, schools, or hospitals call themselves regenerative businesses. When a social worker helps a client find hope again, or a civil servant designs a policy that restores dignity – what is that, if not re-generative? These organisations don’t wrap themselves in buzzwords. They act. They (re-)generate futures daily.

Why, then, do we reserve the term regenerative for recycled sneakers and corporate manifestos?

Towards ecological enterprise

Let me offer a suggestion. If we’re serious about aligning intention, impact, and imagination, let’s drop “regenerative business” and try something less self-congratulatory: ecological enterprise. Ecological – not just green. Not just clean. Aware of the systems it inhabits. And enterprise, not business: an endeavour. A human project. Not just a quarterly report.

And if we want to be bold, let’s ask:

- What world are we creating with the words we use?
- What would it take for regeneration to be embedded, not bolted on?
- What might it mean to be a for-profit, generative enterprise in a regenerative context?

¹ Christian Wahl. Can regenerative economics & mainstream business mix?
<https://medium.com/activate-the-future/can-regenerative-economics-mainstream-business-mix-ef2f8aafa8d4>

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Let’s drop ‘generative business’ and try something less self-congratulatory: ecological enterprise.



Chris Laszlo

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Is Regenerative Business an Oxymoron? A Choice of Perspectives

This article was written in response to one by Cees Hoogendijk (included in the same issue of *AI Practitioner*) entitled 'Regenerative Business: A Cautionary Note'. The editors' and author's intention is to provide an alternative and balancing point of view on this important subject that offers a choice of perspectives.

Preface

This article was written at the request of the guest editors for this special issue. Having accepted a wonderfully provocative article by Cees Hoogendijk (titled "Regenerative Business: A Cautionary Note") written from a perspective questioning the core idea that business can be a force for good, we felt a response of some sort would be useful, given the topic of the issue. Chris was given a "blind version" of that article. This is what he offers in response, choosing to focus on the idea of "A choice of perspectives". We suspect the assumptions within both articles are widely shared in our community – in spite of the oppositional nature of some of the authors' assumptions. With that in mind we hope you enjoy both points of view!

Bernard Mohr and Susan Donnan

At a rather dark moment in human history, we see the simultaneous rise of shareholder value at the expense of society and the environment, and a popularization of the term regenerative business.¹ It is therefore

¹ The guest editors of this special issue define regenerative business practices as "activities by a business, (typically in collaboration with other stakeholders) that observably improve current social, economic, and environmental challenges within the business's ecosystem through the development of market-based solutions that deliver value for:

a) society, and/or communities, and/or nature

b) shareholders/investors and/or partners/suppliers, and/or employees, and/or customers

thereby, building a better world for all – as described by frameworks like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals."

*The institution of business
can be studied in terms of
failure and negative impacts
– or in terms of beauty,
resilience, and potential.*

natural to see the emergence of critical perspectives that question whether the term is a distraction at best, and a dangerously false narrative at worst.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) teaches us that we have a choice in the perspectives we adopt and the questions we ask, and that our choices amplify what we want to grow (from the Constructionist and the Poetic principles of AI). AI proposes that “what we focus on becomes our reality,” an ancient Buddhist idea supported by neuroscience and cognitive behavioral therapy research showing that where our attention goes, neural pathways strengthen (reinforcing thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors).

Thus the institution of business can be studied in terms of failure and negative impacts – or in terms of beauty, resilience, and potential.

We can ask, “Are truly regenerative businesses even possible within our structurally dysfunctional and degenerative economic system?”²

Or we can ask “What new value-creating opportunities exist for businesses to regenerate ecologies and restore local communities?” and “What gives life to a business when it is at its best?”

Etymology

We can choose to focus on the “trouble” with the word business. The earliest forms of *bisignis* appear in Old English texts (c. 9th–11th centuries), where the sense is more neutral and often connotes “care, occupation, concern”, with implications of responsibility and ethics in activity. By early Middle English (c. 12th–13th centuries), the emphasis shifts toward “busyness” in the sense of attentive activity, with associations rooted in anxiety and diligence. More recently it has become entwined with commerce and billionaires.

The French term *affaire*, from Latin *ad + facere* meaning “to do” or “to make”, emphasizes action, responsibility, and practical engagement, not just commerce.

The Swedish term for “business sector” is *näringsliv* whose roots are *näring* (nourishment) and *liv* (life), thus “nourishment of life” – economic life as a vital force.

In Japanese, the term 仕事 (*shigoto*) has the roots:

- 仕 = to serve; 事 = matter or thing

² Christian Wahl. *Can regenerative economics & mainstream business mix?*
<https://medium.com/activate-the-future/can-regenerative-economics-mainstream-business-mix-ef2f8aafa8d4>

The meaning: “service work” or “matters that one serves” and “meaningful contribution”.

Capitalism



We can choose to view capitalism through the lens of today’s neoliberalism, with its emphasis on competition, profit maximization, free markets, and limited government. But we should remember this was not always the case. Adam Smith condemned the sole focus on producers and their interests when he noted who would be responsible for perverting priorities in the system of his day:

It cannot be very difficult to determine who have been the contrivers of this whole mercantile system; not the consumers, we may believe, whose interest has been entirely neglected; but the producers, whose interest has been so carefully attended to.

Smith, 1776 (Book IV, Chapter 8, *Of the Principle of the Commercial or Mercantile System*).

Beginning with Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which laid the groundwork for his *Wealth of Nations* (based on a sense of virtue and an understanding that self-interest is not the same thing as behaving selfishly), we see the pursuit of the common good being strengthened by [John Locke](#), [Thomas Jefferson](#), [Louis Brandeis](#), [John Maynard Keynes](#), [Karl Polanyi](#), and more recently [Stuart Hart](#).

Adam Smith condemned the sole focus on producers and their interests.

Alternatives to neoliberalism do exist, and they are forms of capitalism that practitioner-scholars would do well to amplify. Organizations with regenerative business models, such as the carpet and flooring company Interface (also discussed on page 64) and [Grupo Bimbo](#)³, focus on planetary health and societal wellbeing as a business strategy. They create and deliver value at multiple stakeholder levels – including nature, societies, customers, suppliers and partners, shareholders and investors, and employees – through activities promoting regenerative leadership, co-creative partnerships with nature, and justice and fairness. The premise is that social and environmental challenges represent hidden business opportunities for companies to create value for their customers and owners/shareholders.

Over 5000 examples of business innovations that do good for people and the environment have been identified through the Fowler Center’s [AIM2flourish](#) program. This is not meant to suggest that paying attention to shareholder

³ Grupo Bimbo has held the number one spot for eleven consecutive years in MERCO’s ranking of Mexico’s most responsible ESG companies (covering Environmental, Social, and Governance dimensions). It leads all three ESG subcategories: environment (E), internal/clients/society (S), and ethical governance (G).

Alternatives to neoliberalism do exist, and they are forms of capitalism that practitioner-scholars would do well to amplify.

Real-world application sometimes leads to unintended negative consequences.

returns is no longer important: in order to survive and thrive, companies will always need to attract investor capital by delivering market-competitive risk-adjusted returns. A better form of capitalism is one in which for-profit businesses that create value for stakeholders and the natural environment have the opportunity to create even more value for their customers and shareholders.

Unintended consequences and 'greenwashing'

While regenerative business practices are designed to have a positive impact on ecologies and/or communities as well as the enterprise, the real-world application sometimes leads to unintended negative consequences. We can see this in instances of regenerative agriculture, for example in no-till farming and agro-forestry.

No-till farming with diverse cover crops is central to regenerative agriculture, aiming to increase soil carbon and reduce erosion, but the unintended consequences can include:

- **Delayed planting and poor yields** In colder, wetter regions, cover crops can delay soil warming and drying in spring, causing poor germination of cash crops.
- **Increased herbicide use** Some farmers, unable to terminate cover crops effectively, resorted to multiple herbicide applications, undermining ecological goals.
- **Soil disease pressure** In some cases, increased moisture and plant residues led to fungal disease outbreaks in soils.

Integrating trees into agricultural systems in agro-forestry is another key regenerative practice intended to sequester carbon, stabilize soils, and enhance biodiversity. The unintended consequences of this practice can include:

- **Displacement of native grassland species** In East African savannas and grasslands, planting non-native or overly dense trees has disrupted native ecosystems.
- **Reduced grazing area for pastoralists** Tree planting has encroached on some rangelands used by indigenous pastoralist communities, reducing fodder availability and triggering conflict.
- **Water table depletion** Some deep-rooted tree species, like eucalyptus, reduced groundwater availability in already dry regions.

Another category of error is over-promising on regeneration outcomes, or making false or misleading claims about a product, company, or organization's environmental practices or benefits to make them appear to be more environmentally friendly than they actually are. These types of non-credible claims increase skepticism and disbelief.

Take the following instance: In 2020, Walmart declared that it would take the radical step to becoming a regenerative company (Walmart News, October 6, 2022). But what does this mean for a big-box US retailer with supply chains across the world? How much of what Walmart is planning to do still falls into the category of doing less harm, rather than making a positive impact? How many of its regeneration innovations will “move the needle” on the social and ecological issues they purport to address? (Laszlo et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The Appreciative Inquiry opportunity is to focus regenerative business on its strengths and on its potential for solutions to the current polycrisis. Research into human behavior offers compelling evidence that people are more willing to change – and that the change is more enduring – when it is built on strengths rather than weaknesses, and on positive images of the future rather than on negative ones (Frederickson et al., 2008).

Non-credible claims increase skepticism and disbelief.

Instead of seeing businesses and their stakeholders as separate entities, the AI Summit methodology takes a radically different approach to system transformation. It sees the prevailing notion of “external stakeholders” as a worldview error embedded in a consciousness of separateness. The AI Summit method specifically refutes the idea of an organization as separate from its economic, social, and ecological environments. It emphasizes the fact that all organizations are “wholes of wholes” constituting an interdependent and complex network of vital relationships, interorganizational relatedness, and stakeholder groupings that include the biosphere.

People are more willing to change – and that the change is more enduring – when it is built on strengths rather than weaknesses.

Through an Appreciative Inquiry lens, regenerative business is a vitally needed form of for-profit enterprise that is here to stay. How it develops as a movement will depend in part on amplifying its positive potential in collaboration with other communities of practice related to the promotion of sustainable and flourishing enterprise.

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Nourish to Flourish

Nourish to Flourish brings together practitioners' voices and creative practices, and appreciative reviews of resources that support strengths-based approaches to human interactions.

Voices from the Field



Keith Storace | Australia

Keith Storace is a registered psychologist with the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA) and an associate fellow with the Australasian College of Health Service Management (ACHSM). He manages a private practice at Kiku Imagination where he applies the Appreciative Dialogue (ApDi) therapy program to assist individuals move toward, strengthen and enjoy what is meaningful while dealing with the challenges they encounter along the way. Keith has been the editor of the Voices from the Field column for *AI Practitioner* since 2016.

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Following the publication of my article *Appreciative Inquiry and the Young Philosophers: Cultivating Hope and Agency in a Complex World* (*AI Practitioner*, September 2025), many readers reached out asking for more practical guidance on how to apply the ten principles in conversations with young people. In that initial article, I described young people — who are our thought leaders of tomorrow — as “young philosophers,” because their questions, reflections, and evolving perspectives can shape the future as powerfully as their actions. This follow-up piece is a direct response to those requests. It explores how parents, mentors, coaches, educators, and counsellors can translate these principles into reflective practices that help young people deepen their self-understanding, strengthen their sense of agency, and actively participate in shaping their own unfolding stories.

The Young Philosophers, Part II: Applying the Ten Principles of Appreciative Inquiry as a Pathway to Growth

Adolescence is a time of deep transformation. It's when questions of identity, belonging, purpose, and agency surface. Many young people, however, are expected to have answers before they have had the time or space to explore these questions for themselves. In a world that values speed, reaction, and surface engagement, taking time to reflect can feel countercultural – but it is exactly this slowing down that enables deeper insight and growth. Reflection is more than just introspection; it is an active, constructive process. It creates coherence in the stories young people tell about themselves. It uncovers strengths that might otherwise go unnoticed. It sheds light on choices in situations



that seem limited. Most importantly, it shifts the sense of meaning from something to be found “out there” to something that can be created from within.

The ten principles below have been adapted from the original framework of Appreciative Inquiry, first developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (1987) and further elaborated by Jeanie Cockell and Joan McArthur-Blair (2012), and Lea Waters and Mathew White (2015) to support reflective practice in therapeutic, educational, and developmental contexts.

1. Constructionist principle: Language shapes experience

The stories we tell ourselves become the reality we live in. Language doesn’t just describe our experience – it actively shapes it. For young philosophers, learning to listen to their internal dialogue and reshape it is a key act of agency. Changing the words they use can alter how they interpret challenges, how they see themselves, and how they approach growth.

Reflective process:

Try using language that views your situation as evolving rather than fixed.

- Notice the phrases you use when talking about yourself, especially during tough times.
- Try using language that views your situation as evolving rather than fixed.
- Reflect on how one change in words can shift how you feel and what you believe is possible.

Example: If a young philosopher notices they often say, “I’m failing”, they can reframe this to “I’m learning”. This isn’t about sugarcoating reality – it’s about recognising that language influences belief. As words move from self-blame to a growth mindset, internal stories become more positive, creating space for persistence and creativity.

2. Simultaneity principle: Curiosity itself is an action

Change does not wait for the future – it starts the moment a new question is asked. In Appreciative Inquiry, inquiry itself is a generative force. For young philosophers, learning to ask different questions is a way to redirect focus, shift perspective, and unlock movement where there once was stagnation.

Replace questions that shut down thinking with ones that open it up.

Reflective process:

- Become aware of the types of questions you ask when things feel tough.
- Replace questions that shut down thinking (“Why can’t I...?”) with ones that open it up (“What might help here?”).
- Notice how your mood, behaviour, and outlook change as soon as curiosity enters the situation.

Example: In a moment of frustration, a young philosopher might ask, “Why is this going wrong?”. If they instead ask, “What matters most in this situation?” the question itself begins to reorient their focus towards priorities and strengths. The very act of inquiry becomes the first step towards meaningful change.

3. Anticipatory principle: The future takes shape in the images we hold of it

The future doesn’t just happen – it is rehearsed in the present through imagination. The stories young philosophers tell about what lies ahead directly shape their choices today. When they become conscious of imagined futures, they gain the power to choose and cultivate the ones they want to grow into.

Reflective process:

- Bring awareness to the future scenarios running silently in your mind.
- Notice how any negative rehearsals (like anticipating failure) shape current behaviour.
- Practise rehearsing qualities like courage or kindness and observe how they influence the choices being made right now.

Example: If a young philosopher repeatedly imagines themselves failing at a new task, their body may respond with anxiety and avoidance. But if they imagine themselves navigating challenges with determination and calm, they start to behave in ways that make that outcome more likely. The future they visualise becomes a self-fulfilling map for the present.

4. Poetic principle: What we choose to notice becomes the story we live

Our experiences are vast, yet we only live within the parts we choose to notice. This principle teaches young philosophers that where they place their attention

determines the narrative they build around themselves. Expanding their field of attention helps them construct richer, more balanced stories of who they are and how they are growing.

Reflective process:

- Notice what moments you highlight when reflecting on your day.
- Explore how including different details – not just the hard ones – changes the story.
- Reflect on how your chosen focus shapes your thinking and understanding.

Example: A young philosopher might initially describe their day as “a disaster” because they stumbled during a presentation. But when they also notice the encouragement they received and the progress they made, the narrative becomes more nuanced. They see not just a mistake but also resilience, support, and growth – all of which are equally true and more empowering.

5. Positive principle: Recognise what strengthens rather than what drains

Human beings, like plants, tend to grow towards what gives them life. Paying attention to sources of strength and vitality is not about ignoring problems – it’s about building the energy needed to address them. For young philosophers, cultivating an awareness of what sustains them lays the groundwork for resilience and agency.

Reflective process:

Identify the moments in your day when you felt most engaged, alive, or connected.

- Identify the moments in your day when you felt most engaged, alive, or connected.
- Explore what conditions made those moments possible.
- Consider how to create more of those conditions in your daily life.

Example: A young philosopher might recall that they felt most energised while mentoring a peer. Recognising this as a strength – the ability to connect and support – helps them see new ways to contribute meaningfully. These strengths-based insights become stepping stones for purposeful action.

6. Wholeness principle: How we value every part of ourselves and see how it belongs to the whole

Wholeness is the practice of welcoming all aspects of the self – including the parts we would rather ignore or hide. Growth occurs when young philosophers learn that vulnerability, uncertainty, and doubt are not weaknesses to suppress but parts of a complete, authentic identity.

Reflective process:

- Identify parts of yourself you often silence or ignore.
- Reflect on how these parts might have wisdom or value.
- Practise integrating them into your self-understanding rather than pushing them away.

Example: A young philosopher might resent their cautious side, believing it holds them back. But when they recognise that caution also helps them make thoughtful decisions, they begin to see it as a strength. This integration reduces internal conflict and builds a more coherent, compassionate sense of self.

7. Enactment principle: How we live our values now is already a step towards the future we want

'Becoming' is not a distant event – it is something we practise now.

“Becoming” is not a distant event – it is something we practise now. Every action taken today that reflects the values of the future self helps bring that version of the self into being. For young philosophers, this means they don’t have to wait to “become” – they can begin right now.

Reflective process:

- Identify a quality or role you aspire to embody in the future.
- Choose a small action today that reflects that aspiration.
- Reflect on how these actions influence how you see yourself.

Example: A young philosopher who wants to lead with kindness might make a conscious effort to listen deeply to a friend today. This act is not a rehearsal – it is leadership in action. By living a small part of the future now, they begin to embody the person they wish to become.

*Experiment with telling
a story that emphasises
growth, effort, and change.*

8. Narrative principle: See that the stories we tell can open or close possibilities

The stories we tell about ourselves shape what we believe we're capable of. They can quietly set boundaries or open up new directions, influencing the choices we make and the risks we're willing to take. When young philosophers learn to question and rewrite those stories, they realise that identity isn't fixed – it's something they can shape and reshape as they grow.

Reflective process:

- Identify the recurring stories you tell about who you are.
- Ask yourself if those stories are complete or if new perspectives could be added.
- Experiment with telling a story that emphasises growth, effort, and change.

Example: A young philosopher who often says, "I'm not the type to speak up", can challenge this story by recognising times they did express their views. By rewriting their narrative as, "I'm learning to share my voice more often", they expand their identity and the range of choices available to them.

9. Free Choice principle: Notice where choice is still possible, even in small ways

When life feels beyond our control, there are still decisions we can make – about how we respond and where we direct our energy. Recognising these small but meaningful choices reminds young philosophers that, while they may not shape the situation itself, they can shape their experience within it.

Reflective process:

- Identify areas, however small, where there is still a choice.
- Make intentional decisions in those areas.
- Reflect on how those decisions change the experience of the situation.

Example: A young philosopher might not be able to change a difficult assignment, but they can choose how they approach it – with resentment or with curiosity. That choice alone can shift their energy, engagement, and the meaning they attach to the experience.

10. Awareness principle: Acknowledge the full range of what we feel without turning away

Awareness invites young philosophers to approach their inner world with openness and curiosity. Instead of avoiding uncomfortable feelings, they learn to see them as signals – messages about what matters most. Emotional literacy deepens their capacity for empathy and resilience.

Reflective process:

- Pause and notice emotional responses without judgement.
- Ask what each feeling might be trying to communicate.
- Practise holding multiple emotions without rushing to resolve them.

Example: A young philosopher might feel sadness and excitement before moving to a new school. Instead of trying to push one feeling away, they can acknowledge that, while sadness honours what they're leaving behind, excitement celebrates what's ahead. Holding both allows a richer, more integrated experience.

Living the principles

These ten principles ... are a way of being.

These ten principles form more than a reflective framework: they are a way of being. They teach young people that language shapes identity, that questions create change, that the future is already unfolding, and that their stories are theirs to rewrite. They remind them that every part of themselves belongs, that choice is always possible, and that emotions carry wisdom rather than weakness.

When we guide young philosophers through these pathways, we help them move beyond passive reflection into active authorship of their lives. In doing so, we give them more than tools for coping – we nurture their capacity for meaning, agency, and connection in a complex and changing world.

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Feature Choice

AXA's Human-Centred Strategy: Getting Talent Excited (Not Just Ready) for their Future of Work

This article explores how AXA Hong Kong and Macau, a market-leading insurance company, took a systemic and forward-looking approach to succession planning and talent management using Appreciative Inquiry – an approach that shifted the focus from 'getting people ready for a job', to 'getting people excited for their future'.

Conventional approaches to talent management tend to focus on identifying and preparing successors based on their current competencies and skills. While well-intentioned, these approaches rest on two critical underlying assumptions – that jobs have a fixed success profile and the factors contributing to success today will remain relevant in the future.

But consider this: how many roles in your organisation today did not exist five years ago? How many still exist but have evolved significantly in scope and expectations? As the social, economic, and ecological landscape continues to shift, the future of work is becoming increasingly unpredictable. By the time the talents are developed to the current role expectations, they may not be ready for the emerging roles they will be expected to fill. This raises a deeper question: Who will be ready to take up the roles that have yet to emerge?

It is worth reflecting on what we mean by getting people “ready” for jobs. Let's step back and re-visit a fundamental question – what do we actually want from



FLOW

How does AXA define HIPO?

At AXA, high potentials are people with strong performance capacity who demonstrate a high degree of readiness to advance to other, more challenging, roles horizontally or vertically, roles that might not exist today, and who have a strong aspiration to grow and achieve their career goals.

a succession plan? In this article, we explore how AXA Hong Kong and Macau (AXA), a market-leading insurance company, takes a systemic and forward-looking approach to succession planning and talent management – one that shifts the focus from “getting people ready for a job”, to “getting people excited for their future”.

Guided by the 5D model of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and its core principles, AXA’s Human Resources team and Flow Consulting Limited (FLOW) partnered to design and deliver a series of development interventions for people at different organisational levels. Over the past six years, starting in 2019, a range of AI models, tools, and processes have been leveraged to support individuals in discovering their uniqueness, dream of new possibilities, and take meaningful actions to bring those dreams to life.



A short video featuring Isabel Lam and Dodo Tang of AXA Hong Kong & Macau along with Vivien Hau of Flow Consulting Ltd in which they share the intentions and outcomes of the talent strategy and development process, co-created using Appreciative Inquiry principles.

In this article, we explore a few key success factors in this journey, including the empowerment of leaders and executive sponsorship, and the stories of real career mobility and transformation across diverse functions. Through this lens, we invite readers to reflect on how AI can reimagine succession planning – not as a process to fill roles, but as a movement to unlock human potential and co-create a future.

Revisiting the starting point: AXA’s talent landscape six years ago

In 2019, AXA embarked on a transformative journey to redefine its approach to talent management in response to evolving organisational needs and their strategic vision. At the time, the company faced several critical challenges that highlighted the urgency for change.

One of the initial challenges was the difficulty high-potential employees (HIPOs) had in articulating their career aspirations. When asked about their goals (typically framed as “What is your career aspiration over the next three to five years?”), many struggled to provide a clear and forward-looking response.

Appreciative Inquiry, a strengths-based and positive approach to organisational change, seeks to identify and develop the best in people and organisations. The core principles of AI, which describe the basic tenets of the underlying philosophy, were developed in the early 1990s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. An appreciative approach leads us to appreciate 'best of what it is', imagine 'what might be', and design 'what can be' to create 'what will be'.

They often focused on what they did not want or redirected the question, asking, "What can the company offer me?" This revealed a prevailing dependence on traditional, vertical career paths (e.g. an actuary aspiring to become chief actuary) and a lack of self-directed ambition. The Talent Management team sought to shift the narrative, encouraging HIPOs to explore career opportunities aligned with their own values, strengths, and qualities.

Secondly, the rapidly evolving business landscape had given rise to new, often undefined roles, demanding talents not only adaptable but also intrinsically motivated to meet emerging global needs. A confluence of transformative forces including the rise of artificial intelligence and technological innovation, shifting demographic trends, and global health crises have fundamentally reshaped traditional roles within the insurance sector. At the same time, these changes have created entirely new roles for which conventional education systems do not as yet prepare students. This shift made clear the urgency for organisations to cultivate a talent pool which welcomes new challenges that align with people's unique strengths and ambitions.

Finally, talent development was largely seen as the responsibility of HR, resulting in missed opportunities for line managers to actively engage in nurturing their HIPOs. Even those managers who were willing to support development efforts often lacked the necessary coaching skills.

These challenges collectively catalysed AXA's determination to build a more future-inspired talent strategy – one that would not only prepare individuals for what lies ahead but also energise them to embrace and shape the unknown with confidence and purpose.

Reimagining talent strategy through AI: The Talent Management vision

The Poetic principle : Be choiceful of a start point/focus

What we focus on, grows. An aspiring and positive focus sets a different tone for AXA's transformative journey of its talent strategy.

Faced with that series of challenges, AXA made a deliberate decision to pause and reflect. The core Talent Management team was brought together for an offsite retreat to reimagine the future of the talent strategy. FLOW was invited to facilitate this pivotal session, using the AI 5D model – Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver – as the guiding framework.

Define: Establishing the focus

Prior to the offsite, the Talent Management team engaged business leaders and the broader HR community to gather diverse perspectives on the existing talent strategy. Using the From Good to Great (Lustig et al., 2019) framework (see Figure 1) to analyse the feedback, a striking insight emerged: over 80%

of responses focused on identifying problems or aiming for a return to a baseline state; only 16% were related to striving for something better. Not one articulated a clear aspiration, or an expectation for that better state. With this finding, a deliberate flip of the offsite's focus was made toward an inquiry into the 'BEST' – what might be possible if the team aimed higher. Each team member reflected on three core questions:

- What do we really want to achieve here?
- What are your biggest hopes?
- What kind of experience do we want to create for the HIPOs/ managers/ organisation?

This inquiry reframed the conversation, leading to the articulation of a bold and affirmative topic:

Figure 1. From Good to Great



What is our greatest aspiration for the Talent Strategy?

Discover: Uncovering strengths and successes

Each team member was given a tailored brief to explore strengths and past successes through a structured AI process. This phase fostered deep connection and a renewed sense of purpose within the team, laying a strong foundation for the next stage – Dream.

Dream: Envisioning a positive future

Through a collective visioning exercise, the team articulated their aspirations for AXA's talent strategy. The result was a co-created, strategic vision:

Guided by the Talent Management vision, “Partner with you to live a better life”, AXA has continuously refined its strategic direction, summarized in a short, memorable phrase, year upon year, ensuring alignment with the evolving business landscape and AXA’s global priorities. Because the vision was co-created through a collaborative process, it fostered a strong sense of shared ownership across the team: each member was deeply engaged and committed to bringing the vision to life:

- 2019: Partner with you to live a better life.
- 2020: To embrace people’s uniqueness and partner with you to live a better life.
- 2024: To progress, live out and shine through our uniqueness together!

Partner with you to live a better life.

This inspiring statement became the cornerstone of AXA’s talent strategy, guiding its direction over the next six years.

Design: Co-Creating the path forward

With the vision in place, the team began designing a plan to bring it to life. Recognising the tendency to anticipate stakeholder criticism, the team was invited to adopt a “stakeholder compliments” exercise – an appreciative approach to stakeholder analysis. They explored key stakeholder perspectives by asking: What will our stakeholders (or stakeholder groups) be impressed by when they see our dream has been realised? This approach fostered a more constructive and empowering mindset in stakeholder engagement.

Deliver: Implementing and sustaining change

The excitement generated during the Design phase led to a sustained partnership between AXA and FLOW. Together, they co-designed and delivered a strategic journey aligned with the newly defined vision.

AXA’s Talent Management transformative journey: A systemic and forward-looking approach

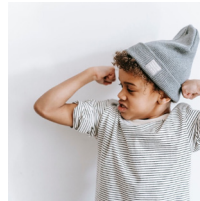
With AXA’s Talent Management vision at its core, a series of thoughtfully designed interventions have been delivered to support the development of HIPOs and their managers. Guided by a spirit of continuous growth and improvement, the core team has evolved them over the years in response to emerging needs and insights. This article takes a retrospective look at the journey – exploring how the programmes have grown, adapted, and deepened their impact across the organisation.

The HIPOs’ journey – Empowering HIPOs through Appreciative Inquiry

Following AXA’s annual HIPOs identification process, selected individuals are invited to embark on their development journey through Careerpreneur – a programme designed to take HIPOs out of their day-to-day work and into a reflective, aspirational space. The name Careerpreneur reflects the belief that each person is the entrepreneur of their own career, empowered to shape their path with intention and authenticity.

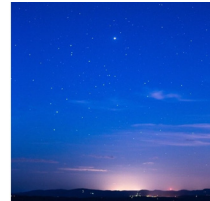
The programme is structured around the backbone of a bespoke “3P” framework, guiding participants through a transformative experience of self-discovery, visioning, and action in three phases.

The ‘3Ps’
Image credit: Canvas



POSITIVE CORE

Discover the unique
positive core of me and my
career



PURPOSE

Dare to dream for the
leadership impacts I can
create



PROGRESS

Design the way towards
our purpose and live out
our uniqueness together

The 3 Ps:

- **Phase 1:** Positive core (Discover)
- **Phase 2:** Purpose (Dream)
- **Phase 3:** Progress (Design and Deploy)



Positive core

Phase 1. Positive core: Discovering the unique positive core of me and my career

In response to the common challenge among HIPOs of articulating their aspirations, we chose to begin with introspection. We invited them to take an “inside out” approach and explore their positive core, rather than diving directly into setting career goals.

The positive core encompasses an individual’s strengths, values, hopes, aspirations, achievements, and best practices (Lustig et al., 2019). It represents the best of who we are – often hidden or underutilised – and serves as a powerful foundation for growth. Unlike qualifications or job titles, the positive core is intrinsic. It is our DNA – what we can’t not be. When we understand and embrace it, we gain clarity on what we offer to the world naturally.

Knowing our positive core enables us to respond to emerging work opportunities with confidence and authenticity. Through a guided AI process, HIPOs engaged in storytelling to surface their inherent talents and qualities. Sharing personal stories allowed them to reconnect with the emotions and meaning behind their experiences, supported by attentive listening and social bonding with peers.

This collective affirmation helped each participant articulate and embrace their uniqueness.

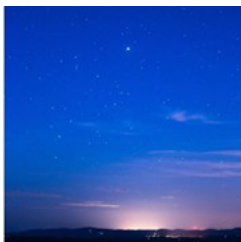
The journey continued with a structured exploration of personal values – what truly matters and how it connected to their career and leadership. Together, their talents, qualities, and values revealed their “true colours” (Shaked & Hau, 2021). This Discover phase anchored participants in a secure base (Kohlrieser et al., 2012) – a sense of self that prepared them to dream boldly.



Reconnecting with the leader within
By Natalia D'Cruz, GI & Life Contact Centre Director

There was a time when I genuinely believed that I was good in certain areas only. This thinking limited me and prevented me from trying new things. But over the past few years, I started to feel the leader in me emerging – tentatively at first, and far outside my comfort zone. With years of experience in a general insurance call centre, I took a bold step to expand into the life insurance space. My dream has always been to become the best version of myself – a version that is constantly evolving. What enabled this transformation was an inspiring journey of rediscovering the value in my work – and in myself – sparked by the Careerpreneur and subsequent HIPOs programmes.

I came to realise that there is something inherent in me, and I have the power to choose how I use it.



Purpose

Phase 2. Purpose: Dare to dream for the leadership impacts I can create

Martin Luther King, Jr said, “I have a dream”, not “I have a change plan”. The Anticipatory principle reminds us that the image of the future inspires action. The more hopeful and positive the image, the more energised and purposeful present actions become. It propels us to move forward and overcome the challenges in front of us.

With clarity of their positive core, HIPOs were invited into a creative dreaming process – a safe space in which to envision a future where their strengths would be fully lived and expressed. This phase encouraged bold aspirations aligned with AXA’s evolving landscape and abundant opportunities.

As Mark Batterson (2016) writes, “If your dream doesn’t scare you, it’s too small”. Over the years, experiments with various media and visual tools and inspiration by successful market leaders have supported this dreaming process. With the advent of generative artificial intelligence, new possibilities emerged, allowing participants to express their dreams in vibrant, imaginative ways. The

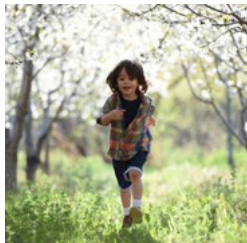
The Anticipatory principle: Images of the future inspire action

Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive and hopeful the image, the more positive the present-day actions.

The Positive principle: Positivity leads to flourishing moments

Changes, small or large, require an abundance of positive affect and strong social bonds. Positive emotions amplify the positive core of individuals and systems, enabling flourishing and fruitful moments.

(Godwin & Stavros, 2021)



Progress



dreams articulated have often exceeded expectations, revealing futures no one had imagined.

With the dream articulated, participants explored its connection to purpose:

How can I bring this dream to life as a leader at AXA?

Phase 3. Progress: Designing the path forward and living our uniqueness together

With dreams and purpose in their hearts, HIPOs moved into actions. This phase focused not on immediate execution, but on designing meaningful progress – small, positive steps that build momentum and resilience – towards their aspiring dreams.

HIPOs collaborated to craft their way forward, supported by practical tools and inspiration. For example, they were guided to take an “outside in” exploration of their stakeholders’ perspectives through the lens of AI, building up motivation and intentionality to connect with key stakeholders, who would help them move toward their dreams. In this phase, the emphasis was on activating aspiration – motivating individuals to persist through challenges and embrace growth. AXA continued to provide robust support to help HIPOs bring their visions to life.

My Journey through Careerpreneur: From Self-Doubt to Self-Recognition
By Roy Lee, Manager, Brand & Advertising

The programme marked a pivotal shift in my professional journey – from self-doubt to self-recognition. When I was selected as a HIPO, my first reaction was, “Why me?”, a reflection of my uncertainty about my own capabilities. The most transformative breakthrough was gaining self-awareness and embracing my unique strengths. I became more willing to step outside my comfort zone, taking on new projects such as cross-company ESG initiatives and cross-departmental innovation.

The programme offered a safe and supportive space to explore my aspirations and clarify what drives me at work. When Vivien invited me to dream, I initially questioned whether we should focus on something more practical. But with the encouragement to dream creatively and boldly, I envisioned myself standing on stage, holding a trophy.

Remarkably, the following year, I received the Outstanding Marketing Professional Award from the Hong Kong Management Association, widely regarded as the “Oscar” of the marketing profession! The programme inspired me to dream about my career, and helped me feel excited and mentally ready to pursue it.

Angela Wong, our Chief Marketing and Customer Officer and Stephanie Lai, our Brand and Digital Marketing Director, have been my guiding lights throughout. Their guidance has not only prepared me for future responsibilities but also inspired me. Stephanie’s coaching has shaped my growth through regular one-on-one check-ins and by consistently challenging me to think two leadership levels ahead. When I become a people manager, I hope to coach others with the same wisdom and care that they have shown me.

The journey of HIPOs managers: Enabling change through appreciative leadership

The Constructionist principle : Words create worlds (Godwin & Stavros, 2021)

Human beings co-create reality through conversations and social interaction. The narratives and language used by managers and HIPOs shape how they perceive themselves, each other, and the possibilities ahead.

While HIPOs are encouraged to dream boldly, meaningful change cannot occur without sponsorship and sustained support. Recognising this, AXA adopted a systemic approach to talent development by empowering HIPOs managers as coaches. Leader as Coach was designed to equip managers with the appreciative mindset and skills to support their HIPOs through transformative career conversations.

Phase 1: Building empathy

To foster empathy and alignment, managers were invited to experience the same journey as their HIPOs, discovering their own positive core, dreaming boldly, and exploring their purpose within AXA. These sessions were co-facilitated by Isabel Lam, Chief People and Corporate Management Officer, demonstrating executive sponsorship and reinforcing the importance of the leaders’ role in this journey.

A safe and generative space was created to surface and reframe common psychological blocks. Questions like “What if I lose a HIPO to another team?” or “Where do I stand if I’m not chosen as a HIPO?” were explored. The executive team recognised managers for their role in growing HIPOs – affirming their identity and contribution as talent developers.

This phase was designed not only to build empathy but also to inspire managers to connect with their own aspirations, deepening their understanding of the psychological journey their HIPOs were undertaking.

The Simultaneity principle: Questioning creates change

Questioning is an intervention. The moment we ask a question, we initiate change. Equipping managers to ask intentional, appreciative questions makes a profound difference.

AXA organised small-group fireside chats – safe spaces for celebrating successes, sharing challenges, and learning from one another.



Phase 2: Developing a coaching mindset and skills

During Phase 1, foundational coaching skills – such as attentive listening – were activated through storytelling and peer dialogues. A quiet yet powerful community formed among the managers, providing a secure base for further growth. Phase 2 focused on equipping managers with targeted coaching skills rooted in Appreciative Inquiry and complementary coaching frameworks. These skills enabled managers to support HIPOs in discovering their positive core, articulating purpose, and making progress.

AI proved especially effective in helping HIPOs articulate aspirations. As Jane Magruder Watkins often emphasised in her work on AI, “Behind every concern, problem, or complaint, there is a wish ... a wish for something better”, as many of those who attended her workshops may remember. AI helped uncover these unspoken wishes, opening pathways to possibility and hope.

Phase 3: Sustaining support

Applying new coaching skills in real-life scenarios can be challenging. Managers often face complex situations that require adaptability and reflection. To support them, AXA organised small-group fireside chats – safe spaces for celebrating successes, sharing challenges, and learning from one another. AXA also invested in elevating coaching capabilities among the Human Resource Business Partners and the Talent Management team to support both the HIPOs and their managers, creating a robust support system.

Over the past six years, we have witnessed a meaningful shift in how HIPOs’ managers engage with their talent. They have taken greater ownership in initiating career conversations, partnering with HR, and supporting development – even when it means encouraging growth beyond their own teams.

Cultivating growth and trust through coaching

By Kenny Chau, Senior Manager, Digital Engagement & Innovation CoE

Growth and change have always been core values for me – yet they weren’t clearly defined and deeply examined until the start of my HIPOs journey. I vividly remember expressing a dream through the image of a growing tree, symbolising a platform to nurture talent, and a culture rooted in trust and transparency. At that time, the vision felt blurry. But looking back now, I realise I’ve been steadily moving in that direction.

When I took on an expanded role leading a team focused on digital innovation and artificial intelligence, I became more intentional about engaging in career conversations and recognising “coachable moments”, both within my team and across others. My professional domain is constantly evolving. No one has all the answers. As I stepped into a people manager role, AXA gave me the opportunity to enrich my coaching skills. I now hold bi-weekly check-ins with my direct reports and monthly sessions with their team members. What begins as a one-hour conversation often extends to two or three, allowing us to explore more deeply and support each other in leading teams and broadening perspectives. Sometimes my direct reports joke with me: “Are you using coaching skills on me?”

One of the most impactful tools I’ve gained from the Leader as Coach programme is the use of value cards. I purchased a set and regularly facilitate this exercise with my team, helping them reflect on and clarify their priorities in life and work. One day, a talent from another team heard about it and asked me to guide her through the process. The emotional moment we shared was very meaningful. It’s incredibly fulfilling to help name and understand the values of those around me, to know what truly matters to them.

While I’ve built strong individual relationships with each of my team members, my aspiration is to foster stronger bonds among the team as a whole. I believe that when people feel seen, heard, and valued, they grow—and so does the culture we create together.

The journey of experienced HIPOs managers: Sustaining coaching excellence

Following the successful implementation of the Leader as Coach and Careerpreneur programmes, positive feedback highlighted the impact on both HIPOs and their managers. Yet, as Sally Wan, CEO, AXA Greater China, insightfully noted:

Coaching is not a one-time skill – it’s a continuous journey of growth and connection.

Sally Wan, CEO,
AXA Greater China

Coaching is not a one-time skill – it’s a continuous journey of growth and connection – one that requires commitment, reflection, and practice. At AXA, we believe in nurturing this journey over time, empowering our leaders to grow alongside their teams and unlock the full potential of those they support.

With Sally’s sponsorship, AXA extended its commitment to leadership development by launching Leader as Master Coach, an intervention designed to sustain and deepen coaching capabilities among experienced HIPOs managers, offering both a refresher and an advanced learning experience.

The design of this intervention is closely tied to the evolving business landscape, with themes tailored to emerging challenges. For example, during the pandemic, the focus was “coaching under the new normal”, while in times of rapid transformation, the theme was shifted to “coaching through change”. These thematic lenses have helped managers apply coaching skills to real-world contexts, supporting their teams through uncertainty and complexity.

Coaching labs as a safe and generative container for leaders

Beyond skill-building, Leader as Master Coach serves as a safe and generative container for leaders, cultivating human connection, empathy, and a shared commitment to talent development. Small-group coaching labs were introduced to enable managers to refine their skills collaboratively. These labs have evolved into vibrant communities of mutual learning, where leaders can celebrate successes, navigate real-world challenges, and continue growing as appreciative leaders. The power of shared experience and empathetic dialogue has become a cornerstone of the programme’s impact. As Rachel Mak, Head of Service Excellence, reflected:

Now I understand more about my peers’ challenges. When tensions arise at work, there’s a deeper sense of empathy – and we become more proactive in taking that extra step to inquire into each other’s situations.

This spirit of inquiry and connection exemplifies the essence of Appreciative Inquiry.

This spirit of inquiry and connection exemplifies the essence of Appreciative Inquiry: creating spaces where leaders develop skills while building relationships that inspire collective growth and transformation.

A personalised coaching accelerator for leaders

A particularly exciting development has been the emergence of HIPOs who, through their own growth journeys, have become talent developers themselves. As they have progressed in their careers, taking on larger teams and more strategic responsibilities, they have recognised the importance of coaching as a critical leadership capability. In response to their request for deeper support, AXA introduced Coach-the-Coach, a one-on-one intervention with a seasoned coach from FLOW designed to empower these leaders to coach their teams with greater impact and confidence.

Together, these interventions represent a systemic approach to leading with a coaching mindset. They have not only strengthened individual coaching capabilities but also deepened the collective capacity to lead with purpose, empathy, and appreciation.



*As I became more intentional
in my coaching, I began to see
its ripple effect.*

The ripple effect of coaching

By Natalia D'Cruz, GI & Life Contact Centre Director

To me, coaching is about “recollecting your superpower to figure things out by yourself.” The three levels of coaching programmes opened my eyes to the power of coaching – when done with the right intention and tools. This mindset has reshaped how I lead. I have become more proactive in coaching my team – not as a one-off intervention, but as a continuous, intentional practice. I hold regular one-on-one conversations, where we explore each team member’s strengths and co-create solutions to challenges. I have

shifted from an “expert mindset” to a collaborative one: “I’m not here to provide all the answers—we can discover them together.”

One of the most powerful tools I have embraced is the FLIP framework from the Leader as Master Coach. It invites us to flip our focus, from “What’s the worst?” or “How can I be better?” to “What went well?” I have shared this with the talents in my team. When we focus on strengths and the positive impact we can create, the energy in the room changes.

As I became more intentional in my coaching, I began to see its ripple effect, especially in how my team responds to change. In Operations, the rise of artificial intelligence has brought understandable fears: of losing relevance, of being replaced. I am helping my team to shift their mindset from fear to curiosity, from resistance to innovation. We now explore how artificial intelligence can be a tool for transformation, enabling us to lead in automation and service excellence.

Career coaching is not just about climbing the ladder – it is about doing something new, cultivating a spirit of experimentation: “Let me try, even if it might not work the first time.” I have aimed to empower my team with a “can-do” mindset, while also being transparent about my own fears: “Yes, it’s scary, but we can face it together.”

Another shift has been in developing a business mindset. We’re a servicing team – but how can we better support the business? I am grateful to the leaders from other departments who have supported in coaching my team, creating cross-functional learning and connection.

None of this would have been possible without the support of my manager, Raymond Law, Contact & Service Centre Director. He sees both my potential and my limits, and gently blurs the line between them. He challenges me, supports me, and creates a space where I can say, “I’ve tried this, and it’s not working”, without fear that it will be held against me. That trust has been foundational to my growth.

This journey has taught me that leadership isn't about having all the answers; it's about creating the space for others to find theirs.

Organisation Development is about aligning a system's internal resources to solve its own challenges.

Our core focus has been to create a safe, empowering space where HIPOs can reflect deeply on their career aspirations.

This journey has taught me that leadership isn't about having all the answers; it's about creating the space for others to find theirs. It's about seeing the best in people, and helping them see it in themselves.

When seeds become shoots: Embedding change into a system

Six years have passed in the blink of an eye. Almost without noticing, we see that the seeds we planted have grown into young shoots, taking root and steadily flourishing. This transformation is not the result of chance; it reflects the collective strength and unwavering commitment of every part of the system: CEO, HR leadership, the talent management team, business leaders, HR business partners, and many others working together toward a shared purpose. The power of this collaboration has enabled leaders to embed coaching into their daily interactions. At its core, Organisation Development is about aligning a system's internal resources to solve its own challenges. As these hidden strengths are activated through intentional interventions, AXA stands ready to embrace its next chapter with confidence and purpose.

Celebrating success

By Dodo Tang, HR Business Partners and Talent Management Director

Over the past six years, our partnership with FLOW has been instrumental in transforming our HIPOs' development journey. Through implementing a systemic methodology and co-designing career planning and coaching skill development interventions, we have achieved results that far surpass my expectations.

Our core focus has been to create a safe, empowering space where HIPOs can reflect deeply on their career aspirations and develop the navigation skills to articulate their ambitions within the organisation. We encourage them to "dream bigger", exploring potential roles beyond conventional career paths that truly enable them to make a meaningful impact on their personal goals, in their organisation, and in the industry. This cultural shift, evident in recent years, means that HIPOs are increasingly comfortable with engaging their managers in open conversations about purpose, aspirations, and even challenges.

Parallel programmes for HIPOs managers and the HR team have equipped them with essential coaching skills and the right mindset, empowering them to develop tailored growth plans that actively support the HIPOs' aspirations. Our ongoing dialogues with managers reveal a profound sense of fulfillment, as many share how inspired their HIPOs are taking on new roles and responsibilities, fuelling organisational growth.

Traditionally, HR has led the end-to-end talent initiatives – from talent identification and designing development offerings to facilitating career movements. However, we often faced challenges in mobilising HIPOs across functions and divisions. Through joint efforts – building a collaborative ecosystem involving senior management, managers, HIPOs, and HR – we have seen remarkable support from the business in driving talent mobility.

Leaders are increasingly committed to motivating HIPOs to step outside their comfort zones and to preparing them for growth opportunities. Many successful job rotations and new assignments are proactively facilitated by managers who connect HIPOs with other leaders and collaborate with HR to explore mutually beneficial development paths.

A key success factor has been our application of Appreciative Inquiry in annual talent planning.

This approach has fostered a sustainable environment dedicated to developing talents aligned with business ambitions. The impact of these efforts is reflected in our mobility analytics: vertical mobility among HIPOs increased from 15% in 2020 to 34% in 2024, while lateral mobility grew from 8% in 2020 to 20% in 2024. A key success factor has been our application of Appreciative Inquiry in annual talent planning: we reflect continuously on what has worked well and brainstorm innovative ways to address evolving organisational needs, macroeconomic trends, and individual development priorities. This ongoing commitment is fundamental to grooming future leaders, strengthening our management pipeline, and reaffirming our unwavering support for their growth journey.

The power of executive sponsorship in talent strategy

By Isabel Lam, Chief People and Corporate Management Officer

When I was first presented with the vision for talent management strategy and the HIPO journey approach, my reaction was simple: “Why not?” Many people knew that I didn’t start my career in Human Resources; I come from a business background. As a leader, I deeply trust and empower my team. They are the centre of excellence, specialists dedicated to doing what’s best for the business. From a business perspective, my focus is clear: what kinds of talent do we need for the future of work and how can we help in their development journey? That’s the lens I bring to our people strategy.

Our role in Human Resources is to support people’s growth.

A question arose during the executive team’s early discussions: what if participants’ aspirations could only be fulfilled outside AXA? My response was, “What’s wrong with that?” Our role in Human Resources is to support people’s growth. I believe that everyone may have different needs in their own life journey and if someone discovers their true passion and finds a better place to

Don't wait for the perfect plan to begin. Progress matters more than perfection.

thrive, we celebrate that. It's about helping people align their values and dreams with the work they do – not about holding onto individuals who aren't fully committed. We're proud to be a company that gives people the space to grow. That's what makes us a place people are proud to work at. That said, in an organisation as large as AXA, there are countless opportunities for our people to explore – many of which can help them achieve their dreams right here.

My advice for business leaders' organisations embarking on a similar journey is to take ownership of your talent strategy. It's not just an HR initiative; it's a business imperative. And to my HR peers: engage your business leaders as true champions of your strategy. Build those partnerships and co-create the journey. Stay open-minded. Be ready to adapt your approach, and don't shy away from experimentation. We learned through doing, step by step, constantly refining our methods to meet the evolving needs of the business. Don't wait for the perfect plan to begin. Progress matters more than perfection. Because when you lead with purpose and act with courage, you don't just shape talent – you shape the future.

Calling for reflection

As organisations continue to navigate the evolving landscape of work, it is essential to pause and reflect, not only on the current roles we are preparing people for, but on the futures, we are inviting them to co-create. AXA's journey is a reminder that when we lead with appreciation, curiosity, and courage, we unlock the full potential of our people.

Appreciative Inquiry offers a powerful lens for this transformation. It invites us to shift from problem-solving to possibility-seeking, from predicting the future to co-authoring it. By focusing on our unique talents, qualities, values, and aspirations, we create space for individuals and teams to imagine bold futures that align with those talents and take steps toward them with excitement.

The future of work is not just about readiness; it's about possibility.

The future of work is not just about readiness; it's about possibility, about cultivating environments where people feel inspired to grow, contribute, and lead with purpose. We invite organisations on similar journeys to reflect:

*What future are you inviting your people to dream into being?
And how might Appreciative Inquiry help you get there?*

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- Learning is at the heart of what they do: they aim to create and facilitate powerful learning processes.
- The professionals from Kessels & Smit want to be good company to each other and to people they work with: they believe the best solutions are developed in partnerships.
- They strive to be a learning organization, constantly renewing their work processes, structures and approaches. The company is their “laboratory”, where they experiment and find answers for learning and development and organizational questions.

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