

---

# 1

---

## THE “A” GAME Living in Possibility

*“You and I are essentially infinite choice-makers.  
In every moment of our existence, we are in that field of all  
possibilities where we have access to an infinity of choices.”*

– Deepak Chopra<sup>1</sup>

**A**s we begin our quest to achieve harmony from the inside out, we must start with the very foundation of our lives – the bricks and mortar upon which we will build the rest of our world – the fundamental principle to shift our thinking into an infinite world of possibility.

The foundation of all of our work together is an approach to life called the “Appreciative Approach,” or as I like to refer to it, playing the “A” Game. This is the one principle to which I hope you will really pay attention and embrace. It may be the biggest shift you make in your life and work.

The “A” Game uses principles of an organizational approach called “Appreciative Inquiry” pioneered by professors David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in the 1980s. Organizational consultants around the world increasingly are embracing an appreciative approach to bring about collaborative and strengths-based change in organizations. “Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an exciting way to embrace organizational change. Its assumption is simple: Every organization has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful and

---

<sup>1</sup> Deepak Chopra is a world-renowned author and speaker in the field of mind-body healing. [www.deepakchopra.com](http://www.deepakchopra.com)

connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change.”<sup>2</sup>

What a concept! Imagine looking at your world – your work, your home, your chorus – in the context of identifying what *is* working and then consciously building on those strengths to create the changes you want. The “A” Game also embraces making a shift in how we look at individuals – be they colleagues, partners, offspring or fellow chorus members.

“Appreciative Inquiry deliberately seeks to discover people’s exceptionality – their unique gifts, strengths, and qualities. It actively searches and recognizes people for their specialties – their essential contributions and achievements. Appreciative Inquiry builds momentum and success because it believes in people. It really is an invitation to a positive revolution.”<sup>3</sup>

Simply put – the Appreciative Approach is an asset-based approach to life. Most of us have been taught, trained and been rewarded for using a problem-solving approach – that is, to look for what isn’t working, figure out what the problem is, analyze it and then think up ways to fix the problem and put an action plan in place to do so. The problem-solving approach is a deficit-based approach that focuses on what is wrong. The “A” Game would have us identify what *is* working, and imagine and create what *could be* and then implement the action toward the new possibility.

Imagine shifting one’s focus to identifying what is working now – the strengths – and thinking of the potential and how to leverage, expand and grow from that. Imagine spending your time in the world of “what is possible,” instead of “what isn’t possible.”

This approach is important because it gives us an opportunity to move forward and opens up a world of possibility. In the highly technical world of a cappella choral singing, focusing on what is *right* may well be the hardest principle to swallow (especially for our masterfully technical directors and musical leaders). Isn’t the whole idea of a technical art form to find the mistakes and fix them? What possible improvements in technical ability could be made by focusing on individual and collective strengths – on what is right rather than what needs to be improved?

---

2 Cooperrider, David L.; Whitney, Diana; and Stavros, Jacqueline M., *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change*, Lakeshore Communications, 2003, pp. XVII-XIX

3 Cooperrider, D.L. et al (Eds.), *Lessons from the Field: Applying Appreciative Inquiry*, Thin Book Publishing, 2001, p. 12

Herein lies the biggest misunderstanding about playing the “A” Game – about taking an appreciative approach. The approach is a foundation, a guiding principle, and does not mean that one abandons attention to detail or commitment to excellence, nor does it eliminate working to improve technical mastery.

The Appreciative Approach actually creates a better environment for learning. When not bound by the fear and limitations of doing something wrong, one is free to explore the possibilities of doing right.

Back in August 2007, Lions Gate Chorus Master Director, Sandy Marron, was frustrated with the less than commanding vocal authority and confidence of her lead section. (In a cappella Barbershop Harmony, the “Lead” section sings the recognizable melody line and is considered to be pivotal in establishing the “personality” of the chorus.) Typical great lead personalities are characterized by mega-personality, charisma, presence and brash confidence.

With only three months left before the International a cappella chorus singing competition, Sandy was beginning to panic – without the lead section stepping up to the plate and taking command, the chorus’ hopes of achieving its Top Ten goal were dim. A survey of the Lead Section in August 2007 showed that only 20% considered themselves to be “Top Ten” lead singers. Wow. This was a serious problem. How could she best achieve what she wanted?

As Sandy became more tense dealing with the enormity of this problem, she began trying to get what she wanted from the leads by sheer force. As you can imagine, quite the reverse of what Sandy wanted to happen, happened – the lead section knew they weren’t doing well; they lost even more confidence and became afraid of doing something wrong. They began to sing to please the director, or, to avoid disappointing the director. Effectively, their energy became drawn inward, became self-focused and possibilities for learning and improvement were completely shut down at that point. Forward motion was stalled and the chorus’ prospects looked bleak.

Sandy is a masterful and innovative director, and not afraid to take risks. Knowing that she needed to do something differently, she opened herself up to individual coaching with me to work on her approach and her “intention” for rehearsals (see Chapter 7).

She shifted to the "A" Game and incorporated regular and specific acknowledgement of the lead section into every rehearsal. Rather than badger the section about what they weren't doing well, she began regularly to reinforce what they were doing right. By changing her approach to one of appreciating the value, strength and potential of the lead section, and focusing on what they were doing right and then leveraging that to build confidence, Sandy's mastery of the appreciative approach created an open environment of learning and possibility.

I noticed an amazing shift in Sandy – and the almost immediate shift in the lead section was astonishing. A subsequent survey of the section showed that 80% now considered themselves to be "Top Ten" lead singers! Adopting the appreciative approach in no small part contributed to Lions Gate Chorus taking the 2007 International Singing Competition by storm and leaping from a 12<sup>th</sup> place ranking to a 3<sup>rd</sup> place Bronze medal placement.

The "A" Game creates a learning environment of capacity, imagination, possibility, energy and positivity. The appreciative approach acknowledges the contribution of individuals in order to increase trust, empower individuals and create organizational congruency. David L. Cooperrider<sup>4</sup> said that by paying special attention to "the best of the past and present" we can "ignite the collective imagination of what might be."

The "A" Game is a new way of "being" in the world that creates possibilities for the future in any area of our lives.

- The opportunities for learning and growth are expanded because we have placed ourselves in a space of unlimited possibility.
- Our thoughts are freed from the constraints of any limiting boundaries and we have options.
- Situations that seemed stuck or frozen become liberated.
- The possibilities of moving forward are magnified.

---

4 Dr. David Cooperrider, Ph.D. is best known for co-founding the organizational approach of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) which is creating a positive revolution in the leadership of change.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. How could using an appreciative approach and playing the “A” Game shift possibilities and build capacity in the different areas of your life?
2. What could happen in your place of business and with your work team if you took an asset-based approach?
3. How could the “A” Game open up communication possibilities with your family or other relationships?
4. What might happen if you begin to incorporate an appreciative approach into your chorus life or other high-achieving team?

## WHERE'S YOUR FOCUS?

A long time ago, long before the notion of coaches was around, I was working for a company that brought in a consultant for a workshop to get all of the managers motivated. I don't remember much from that day except for a small handout she gave us at the end of the workshop with a diagram on it entitled "Where's your focus?." On the left hand side of the sheet it said, *Don't have, don't want* and on the right side it said *Do have, do want*. I taped that piece of paper to the side of my fridge where, fifteen years later, yellowed and splattered with grease stains, it reminds me daily of one of the fundamental keys to happiness.

Where we focus our minds and energy in our lives is one thing that is completely in our control, completely our choice and has a monumental effect on our joy and well-being. Where do you place *your* focus? Unfortunately, the *don't have, don't want* side of the ledger is the default for many of us and leads nowhere. All it does is make you feel bad and there is no way out of that place until you flip over to the *do have, do want* side.

For example, let's say you are deep in debt and don't have two nickels to rub together. Okay – so you *don't have* money and you *don't want* to be in debt. If you keep your mental focus there, what can you do with that? How can you make any movement out of debt?

If you flip your focus to the other side, the possibilities instantly open up. What do you want? "I *do want* to have enough money to pay off my debt, pay my bills and have enough left over to live." Now you have somewhere to go. Now you can begin to think of concrete strategies to reduce your debt, access more resources, set some goals, and create an action plan.

While you are focusing on the *don't have, don't want* side you are paralyzed in the land of scarcity: scarcity thinking. Shifting to the *do have, do want* side opens up a world of abundance, a world of infinite possibility. A simple shift of where you place your focus can change your life.

"...but Jan," you say, "sometimes there is just mess in my life. I can't be positive all the time." Absolutely... \$)%\*^ happens! No, you don't have to put a positive spin on everything, and, yes, it is just crappy that, say, you got laid off from your job. What I am talking about is the one thing that you do have control over, and that is about where you choose to put your focus – even after something crappy happens. Sure, give yourself time to wallow – get

mad, cry, whatever... but then you can make a choice on where are you going to continue to focus: on what you don't have (e.g., a job) or what you do want (e.g., a new job that you like even more, that pays even better.) Now *that* is something to work with.

This is about focus. This has nothing to do with optimism, nothing to do with positivity. It has everything to do with possibility. It has everything to do with options. By focusing on what we want rather than what we don't want, we instantly get unstuck and free up our thinking. Remember, when we put energy to something, it magnifies. What do you want to magnify? Where is your focus? What possibilities open up if you shift to *do have, do want*?

The principles are absolutely compelling for all parts of your life and pretty much any situation. For example, let's say, the Board of Directors of your chorus is spending a lot of time at their board meeting moaning about how they can't get chorus members to volunteer for the myriad of jobs that are critical to keeping the chorus running. In their inspiring book, *The Art of Possibility*, Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander would say that the Board has embarked on "downward spiral talk" which is a "resigned way of speaking that excludes possibility."<sup>5</sup>

By shifting to the other side of the "Where's Your Focus?" awareness grid and focusing on what they want, the Board can instantly shift to the world of possibility. They might say, "We want more active volunteers so that the chorus runs smoothly." Okay, now they can get into the action planning around that possibility. They might ask, "How can we make it attractive for folk to volunteer?" and "What could we do differently to approach this ongoing challenge?"

Let's take a parenting example to illustrate how focusing on what you want engages and creates conversation with a possibility of going somewhere, and focusing on what you don't want often is a conversation ender:

**Scenario 1: Focusing On What You Don't Want**

**Parent:** "Johnny, I don't want to see your socks all over your bedroom floor – your room is a mess."

**Johnny:** Grunts "humph" and goes on reading.

---

5 Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility* (New York: Penguin Books 2002) p. 108.

**Scenario 2: Focus On What You Do Want**

**Parent:** "Johnny, I would like you to pick up your dirty socks and put them in the laundry hamper please, so that your room is clean before our house guests arrive."

**Johnny:** Grunts "humph"... but puts the socks away.

Notice how a shift in focus could play out at a chorus rehearsal. Let's say the baritones are consistently singing flat in a particular section of a song. If you, as a musical leader, approach this by saying to the baritones, "You are singing flat," it leaves them with nowhere to go. A simple shift to: "Baritones, I need you to lighten up your vocal quality and sing sharper in Bars 7-13," the baritones have an instruction on which they can take action. You can't take action and move forward when you are focused on what you don't have and don't want. It is impossible. By a simple shift to what you want to grow and what could be better, you create a new level of energy that moves you into action.

Meghan had had a brutal day. As a beautiful, intelligent young woman, you would think she had the world at her fingertips – but Meghan has dystonia, a neurological movement disorder she got as a result of a brain tumor and hemorrhage at age thirteen. That hasn't stopped her from becoming a nationally ranked horseback rider in dressage, or singing and doing energetic choreography as a valued member of a world-class a cappella chorus. On most days, it did not affect her positive, optimistic attitude, but today was different. Meghan had fallen victim to the economic downturn and that very day had been laid off from her mid-level marketing job.

After crying all day, she arrived at a Lions Gate Chorus rehearsal that night in a desperate state. It is hard enough getting a job in tough economic times, but when you have a physical disability that allows only partial use of the left side of your body and results in chronic muscle pains and spasms that severely limit physical movement, well – Meghan was feeling very distressed at that point and pessimistic about her future. Focused in a bad place, she hoped that a chorus singing rehearsal would take her out of her funk. I had been working with Lions Gate Chorus coaching them over several months in a holistic program to help them achieve inner



and outer mastery and coincidentally that night was the very night I explored the “Where’s Your Focus?” concept in a workshop with the chorus members.

“It was so cool and synchronistic,” Meghan explained. “I felt really crappy, and all of sudden Jan was asking us to look at our lives and see where we were focusing our energy. I suddenly was rocked out of my bad space and given the gift of perspective. I flashed back to the early days of my dystonia diagnosis, when I lay on the couch for days, depressed, as I realized that I would have to give up my dreams of playing guitar, piano and French horn because I didn’t have mobility in my left arm. I reminded myself of the lesson that I learned then, that things always look worse when you are in the middle of them, and if I stepped back, and if I started focusing on what I had in my life and what I wanted, then I had options and there were possibilities. My life hadn’t ended.”

Meghan realized that she had a choice. She could stay focused on what she didn’t have (a job) and what she didn’t want (to be unemployed) or she could begin to shift and create what she did want in her life and from her next job.

Three weeks later Meghan told me: “You totally helped me get focused and grounded and gave me techniques to refocus my energies. I now realize that there is no stigma attached to being laid off in an economic slowdown and in that way I feel less of a victim. I am optimistic and know that things will pick up from here. I’m kind of loving the time off right now and am ridiculously happy.” (Three months later Meghan successfully landed her “dream job” and is now working in philanthropy for a renowned children’s hospital foundation.)

Where’s your Focus? Like Meghan rediscovered, we can choose where we place our focus, and just as easily, we can choose to place it somewhere else.

### INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE: WHERE'S YOUR FOCUS?

First it is important to be aware of where you are putting your focus and energy in the different areas of your life. You may find that for certain areas of your life you are living in possibility and abundance thinking and in other parts of your life you are woefully mired in scarcity thinking. Fill out the awareness grid on page 11 and notice where you are putting your energy. On which side of the grid are you focusing? Think about what could happen if you shifted to the "*Do have, do want*" focus... to the space of unlimited possibility. Choose an area and consciously make that shift.

**WHERE'S YOUR FOCUS? Awareness Grid**

|   | <i>Don't Have /<br/>Don't Want</i> | <i>Do Have /<br/>Do Want</i> |
|---|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Relationships<br>(family, friends,<br>romantic) |                                    |                              |
| Health &<br>Fitness                             |                                    |                              |
| Money/<br>Finances                              |                                    |                              |
| Work/<br>Career                                 |                                    |                              |
| Home  |                                    |                              |
| Recreation<br>& Free time                       |                                    |                              |

### CHORUS EXERCISE: WHERE'S YOUR FOCUS?

The same exercise is an easy one to adapt to chorus life. Create your own grid for the musical leadership and the management teams of the chorus to fill out with the details of their respective areas of responsibility listed on the left hand side. Have the leadership teams fill out both sides of the grid (the **Don't Have, Don't Want** side and the **Do Have, Do Want** side). Have the teams notice where their focus is being put.

In the appropriate areas, make a conscious effort to collectively shift that focus and explore the possibilities of living on the **Do Have, Do Want** side. What possibilities might open up for chorus members, or for the chorus as a whole if that shift was made? Create an action plan to make that shift. Enroll the chorus members in your new, reframed approach.