Facilitating Organizational Unlearning using Appreciative Inquiry as an Intervention

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Executive Summary

Drawing upon theoretical bases, this paper attempts to demonstrate a relationship between Appreciative Inquiry (AI), an organizational development (OD) intervention, and organizational unlearning. Present day organizations are characterized by continuous change. It has been accepted that change implies learning along various dimensions: cognitive, behavioural, and normative. Any type of organizational learning would involve: (1) creation of new knowledge and (2) getting rid of obsolete knowledge. The first aspect refers to learning while the second aspect relates to unlearning. While literature abounds in studies pertaining to organizational learning, literature on organizational unlearning is relatively few and far between.

While appreciating the fact that both learning and unlearning complement each other and result in change, this paper has attempted to highlight the difference that inherently exists in the process of unlearning, as compared to the process of learning. And it is on account of these differences that the techniques or interventions that facilitate organizational learning may not be appropriate for organizational unlearning. According to Zell (2003), increased resistance to unlearn exists for individuals, groups or organizations due to their fear of loss of time and resources invested earlier in gaining such knowledge. Senge (1990) has described how the diagnostic process of analysing problems and identifying solutions by itself stifles creativity and flexibility and increases resistance. Thus, increased resistance and fear inherent in the unlearning process calls for an affirmative and strength-based approach such as Appreciative Inquiry, vis-à-vis other diagnostic problem-solving interventions. Based on an extensive review of existing literature, this paper attempts to demonstrate how AI can be used as an effective facilitator for unlearning. The complete AI process and principles have been enumerated and mapped to the unlearning process. With an eye to objectivity, the authors have also attempted to identify inhibiting factors that might hinder the process of unlearning while using AI as an intervention.

While adding to existing literature, this paper is also expected to contribute meaningfully by sensitizing practising managers about this technique and logically establishing its efficacy, along with awareness creation of possible challenges that might arise during intervention. This in turn can have significant implications for long-term organizational change initiatives and OD practices.
The current age of socio-economic development has rightly been termed as the “Knowledge Age” by scholars, implying that business fortunes and future growth are based on owning knowledge and utilizing it to create goods and services that improve the global economy (Switzer, 2008). However, knowledge that is relevant to an organization’s current processes/products will contribute to its overall objectives. Hence, only relevant knowledge will be an asset. ‘Relevance’ again depends on the organizational context as well as the larger context of the environment. Given the dynamic environment that today’s businesses have to cope with, the concept of ‘relevance’ itself is undergoing a rapid transition. Thus, what is relevant knowledge today might not be so tomorrow, and vice versa. For instance, in the not-so-distant-past, manual typewriters were widely used in offices. For a typist, the specific knowledge of spacing the sentences or words to the right or left or centre was important. People manually calculated the number of characters in a particular sentence (including the space between words) and then started typing accordingly so that the sentence was well spaced. Today, the computer has displaced this knowledge by calculating the details in just one command (justify/centre/left align/right align). At an organizational level, if people still continued to calculate the space in spite of having computers, it would be futile in terms of time as well as opportunity cost. Hence, it is crucial for an organization to possess relevant knowledge at any point of time. It is not only the pursuit of relevant knowledge to achieve organizational objectives that drives this need, but also the ill effects of possessing obsolete knowledge that can hamper an organization’s growth. Organizations need to consciously manage the process of organizational unlearning, since this could mean the difference between success and failure. Thus, (1) creating new knowledge that is relevant, and (2) getting rid of obsolete knowledge that is no longer relevant are two crucial issues that organizations face today. The first aspect refers to learning, while the second aspect relates to unlearning. While literature abounds in studies on organizational learning, there are only a few studies which have focused on unlearning. One reason for this could be that unlearning is seen as conceptually subsumable under learning, giving rise to the belief that the same methods adopted for learning will be appropriate for unlearning as well (Huber, 1991). However, many researchers have explicitly defined unlearning as different from learning. In this paper, we take the stance that learning and unlearning are inherently different processes. While one (learning) is about developing new understanding/behaviour, the other (unlearning) is about discarding an existing understanding/behaviour. In most instances, unlearning precedes learning. It is only when learning occurs for the first time and there is no previously gained understanding of the particular subject, that unlearning does not precede learning. The relationship between learning and unlearning is cyclical; however, the time gap between each can vary, it could be immediate or delayed. This paper aims at understanding the process of unlearning in detail and proposes Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an intervention to facilitate unlearning.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

Though the process and consequences of unlearning have been established to some extent in literature, an effective method through which managers can facilitate unlearning is not available, to the best of our knowledge. While organizational development interventions have been discussed in literature in the context of organizational learning, a similar connection with unlearning has not been addressed, either at a conceptual or an empirical level. With the conviction that learning and unlearning are inherently different concepts, albeit with the same broad change orientation, this paper aims to address the following questions:

- How do we facilitate unlearning through Appreciative Inquiry (AI)?
- What are the facilitating and inhibiting factors for unlearning at each stage of implementation of AI?
- How does the unlearning process map against the 4-D cycle (Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny) of AI?
- What can managers do to enable and consciously manage organizational unlearning?

THE PROCESS OF UNLEARNING

Unlearning has been defined as a process by which obsolete or misleading knowledge is rejected (Hedberg, 1981). It is a dynamic process that allows identification and removal of ineffective or obsolete knowledge and routines that hinder creation of new knowledge (Navarro and Moya, 2005). Different researchers have had different viewpoints on unlearning. According to
Klein (1989), unlearning is not a comprehensive model for planned change as it ends with discarding knowledge or termination of a specific response. Only when unlearning is coupled with gaining new knowledge or learning new, inherently ‘improved’ responses as compared to the old one, does it contribute to change that brings about positive results. However, other researchers (Argyris and Schon, 1978, Hedberg, 1981, Navarro and Moya, 2005) opine that unlearning is a fundamental process that facilitates new learning. Scholars unanimously agree that unlearning involves an element of change. By combining these definitions, it becomes evident that unlearning (a) is concerned with removing/discard knowledge, (b) can have some subjective value attached to it, such as ‘obsolete’, ‘irrelevant’, ‘unuseful’, etc., and (c) can either be an end by itself or act as a means to a final end, viz., learning or change. The assumption underlying these definitions of unlearning is that it is an intentional process and is not a result of serendipity (Tsang and Zahra, 2008). While De Holan, Phillips and Lawrence (2004) have propounded the concept of ‘organizational forgetting’ as voluntary or involuntary loss of organizational knowledge, our paper has chosen to focus on the intentional discarding of knowledge only.

The Content of Unlearning

Akgun, et al (2007) have identified beliefs, routines, and physical artifacts as the broad classification of unlearning components in organizations. While beliefs represent declarative memory in terms of ‘know-what’, routines represent procedural memory in terms of ‘know-how’. And, physical artifacts symbolize the organizational knowledge. With reference to the location where such knowledge resides, they can be classified as human or non-human bins (Cross and Baird, 2000). Knowledge, as per Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), can either be explicit or implicit. Explicit knowledge is information or data which is theoretical in nature and is mainly stored in technical systems, i.e., ‘non-human bins’, while implicit knowledge includes skills, attitudes, and cultures of individuals stored in the minds of people, i.e., ‘human bins’. Most organizational unlearning involves discarding knowledge from both these bins. Non-human bins typically refer to rules, regulations, organization charts, etc., the removal of which is relatively easy. The bigger challenge however lies in discarding knowledge from the human bins. This refers to beliefs, habits, routines, processes, etc., that are executed by individuals. Managers need to ensure that there is a collective understanding of the importance of discarding such habits, routines or processes. In order to unlearn successfully, it is essential to discard knowledge from both human and non-human bins. Organizations can facilitate the process of unlearning by:

- Encouraging employees to identify a list of redundant task/routine/information on a monthly/quar-terly basis. The belief that every task/routine/information is useful at some point in time or the other makes its abandoning more difficult. A cost-benefit analysis of the time, effort, and resource used to execute the task vis-a-vis the benefit derived in terms of profits, customer or employee satisfaction, etc., can help in classifying whether a particular task/routine/information is redundant or not.
- Providing recognition/incentives for employees who identify such redundant task/routine/information. This will serve to reinforce the organization’s openness to unlearning and thereby encourage employees to consciously ‘unlearn’. It might have been a routine for an organization that recruits about 20 people in a month to ensure that each employee is inducted personally by the HR manager as well as the respective supervisor. If the same routine is continued when the organization recruits 200 people per month, it may prove to be costly in terms of time and effort. One needs to identify the redundancy of this routine, and either abandon it completely or find alternatives (e.g., use electronic media).
- Persuading employees to identify existing routines and suggest ‘improved’ methods of performing the same. However, such ‘improvements’ have to be viewed in a holistic manner. For instance, an improvement which results in only cost-reduction with-
out significant improvement in customer satisfaction might prove ineffective in the long run.

- Redeploying top managers and employees who have been in a particular function for a long time, to other departments (Tsang and Zahra, 2008). Unlearning triggers the fear of loss of power and expertise gained in a given department. This fear creates more resistance to the unlearning process. By redeploying employees who assume power and expertise in a given department to another department, the organization manages unlearning in both departments: the former on account of minimizing potential resistance to unlearning and the latter on account of bringing in new perspectives from another department.

Similar to job rotation, these suggestions can also help facilitate unlearning. The expected benefits from job rotation can range from increasing organizational productivity to individual employee preferences (production flexibility, employee satisfaction, develop multi-tasking capabilities, etc.). Ortega (2001) argues that firm learning is better explained by job rotation than by employee motivation or employee learning-based explanations.

Levels of Unlearning

Unlearning can occur at individual and group levels (Hedberg, 1981) as well as at organizational levels (Klein, 1989). To understand the unlearning process at each of these levels, Navarro and Moya (2005) have identified three phases in which individual unlearning occurs, viz., (1) identification of problem phase, (2) changing of cognitive pattern phase, and (3) incorporation of new measures of control phase. Unlike individual unlearning that is driven by individual motives and needs, group unlearning is driven by the motives and needs of various people, while organizational unlearning is driven by institutional objectives. At the group or organizational unlearning levels, the three phases are: (1) knowledge disintegration, (2) knowledge sharing, and (3) elimination of knowledge (Navarro and Moya, 2005). Individual recognition of obsolete knowledge when communicated to the group marks the beginning of the knowledge disintegration process. The overall attitude or sentiments of employees in and about the group is a strong antecedent of group unlearning. The more welcoming the attitude and sentiments, the more willing the individuals will be to share obsolete knowledge with the group. This facilitates group unlearning. Knowledge sharing is the socialization process in which employees share knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The knowledge elimination phase is a proof of the unlearning process, where individuals, groups or organizations discard obsolete knowledge internalized in the previous phases. Schein (1993) claims that knowledge elimination is the crucial stage in the unlearning process. In order to discard obsolete knowledge, employees must be allowed to participate in discussions concerning tasks/routines/processes. The ideas and suggestions to substitute obsolete knowledge with new and improved routines should stem from employees. In short, therefore, unlearning requires:

1) individuals, groups or organizations to identify existing knowledge
2) individuals, groups or organizations to recognize the obsoleteness of such existing knowledge
3) individuals to express the obsoleteness of knowledge to groups or organizations.
4) groups or organizations to recognize such obsoleteness of knowledge
5) individuals, groups or organizations to resist or avoid the application of such obsolete knowledge.
6) substitution of old knowledge by new knowledge (learning gained).

While steps (1) to (4) represent the beginning of unlearning, the last two steps (5 and 6) represent unlearning in action. As per Schein (1993), the starting point of any learning is dissatisfaction. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) suggest that only a creative process can ensure that such dissatisfaction becomes a motivating source for further learning. The search for a creative process which takes a positive approach and does not focus only on deficiencies as in the problem-solving approach (Barrett and Peterson, 2000) motivated the authors to study the appropriateness of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an intervention to facilitate unlearning. Moreover, organizational size, organization memory, and employee turnover also affect unlearning (Becker, Hyland and Acutt, 2006). Large organizations are often associated with less flexibility where systems and structures become more entrenched in current practices, making unlearning difficult. Organizational memory develops with size and age of the organization; older organizations find unlearning more difficult as their practices have got embedded in the system, allowing very little scope for change (Argyris and Schon, 1978). Organiza-
tions with low employee turnover might find unlearning difficult due to lack of new ideas entering the organization (Becker, Hyland and Acutt, 2006). This paper focuses on the appropriateness of AI as a developmental intervention to facilitate unlearning of explicit and implicit knowledge at individual, group, and organizational levels in organizations.

Since resistance has been considered in literature as the key factor for unlearning initiatives to fail, especially in large and old organizations, our reasoning is primarily drawn from the fact that the level of resistance involved in a positive approach like AI is much less than any other diagnostic approach and hence conceptually, ceteris paribus, should yield better results. Considering this fundamental premise, we feel that AI might be more appropriate for all types of organizations.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI)

Organizational change or development can be initiated through two approaches: (1) deficit-based (diagnostic) approach, or (2) strength-based approach. A diagnostic approach begins by examining problems and finding solutions to rectify dysfunctions. On the contrary, a strength-based approach begins by identifying strengths as resources for change (Sekerka, et. al., 2006). Though diagnostic techniques have had a long history of success, recent research suggests that they are not fully effective due to resistance on account of distrust, power struggles, bureaucracy, and conflict (Quinn and Cameron, 1985). In such cases, a more suitable approach to negate these negative consequences could be AI that helps overcome organizational inertia (Sekerka, et. al., 2006).

Conceptualized by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a novel approach that can complement conventional forms of action research. It begins with the assumption that something is working well in the organization (Barrett and Peterson, 2000). AI takes a positive, collaborative, and participative stance and has been used to facilitate change in the culture of the organization, transform communities, create organizational renewal or excellence, solve conflicts, guide mergers, acquisitions, and other change initiatives (Sekerka, et. al., 2006). By focusing on strengths and positive outcomes, the process of AI is believed to reduce anxiety, fear, and stress that are commonly associated with organizational change.

Literature has specified that increased resistance to unlearn exists for individuals, groups or organizations that have a proven history of expertise and excellence, due to their fear of loss of time and resource in gaining such knowledge (Zell, 2003). Given this condition, traditional problem-solving approaches will increase the fear and thus the resistance. Only a creative approach such as AI that allows such individuals, groups or organizations to capitalize and focus on strengths or past expertise will help reduce resistance. Other approaches that focus on problems or issues do not lay emphasis on past/current success and hence aggravate resistance to unlearn. According to Becker, Hyland and Acutt (2006), individual unlearning is the starting point for group or organizational unlearning, and individuals who believe they are experts in a specific field show more resistance to unlearn as they have invested a lot of time and resource creating their current knowledge, which is mostly internalized in the form of tacit knowledge (Zell, 2003). This assumption of AI that something is working well is critical to reduce resistance and make individuals view situations in a new light. This is also termed as the affirmative competence of Appreciative Inquiry (Becker, Hyland and Acutt, 2006).

At the group or organizational level, routines and practices might hinder unlearning. Knowledge gets embedded in an organization’s routines and practices which are available to a whole range of employees. Even if the initiator of such routine or practice is no longer with the organization and such routine or practice has become redundant to the goals of the organization, they still continue to exist. The common parlance, ‘We have always done it this way!’ is the root cause of such redundant routines or practices. Such deeply-embedded systemic knowledge sometimes create power centres among employees who might hinder unlearning in order to protect status quo (De Holan and Phillips 2004). The AI assumption that something is working well makes employees feel that the change will only have a minor impact as things are already going fine, and make them more amenable to the change initiative.

The Content of AI

There are five principles governing the AI approach, viz., (a) constructionist, (b) simultaneity, (c) poetic, (d) anticipatory, and (e) positive imagery, each of which can facilitate unlearning. The constructionist principle as-
sumes that individuals create as well as perceive their own realities through collective symbols and mental processes. This process of creating and perceiving realities is the process of construction. This principle forms the baseline for understanding an organization. It is this understanding of the past and current status of organizations that help decide their future. This principle holds that human knowledge and organizational destiny are intricately interwoven. Sharing of collective symbols and mental processes can enable a common understanding of the organization among employees. Such sharing can be facilitated in organizations by the following ways:

- **Facilitating formal and informal discussions through meetings, get-togethers, conferences, and similar other forums to enable employees of different tenures to interact.** Employees with greater than 4 or 5 years in the organization, employees with an average of 2-3 years in the organization, and employees with less than a year in the organization need to discuss success stories, positive aspects of employees' attitude, process orientation, competitive advantage, etc., which will help them in sharing individual perceptions and gaining collective understanding.

- **Organizing meetings and other forums to enable employees at different hierarchical levels to describe in their own words the organization, its core objectives, its values, its customer profile, etc., which will help to build a common language of understanding to interpret collective symbols across levels in the organization.**

- **Encouraging discussions among employees from different departments to help share mental processes and provide them with an overall understanding of the organization rather than a fragmented one.** Of the six stages of unlearning detailed in an earlier section, this would facilitate the first stage, i.e., of identifying the existing knowledge.

Inquiry and change cannot be separated. This forms the basis for the principle of *simultaneity*. The seeds of change lie in the questions that one asks. This holds well for unlearning where the inquiry pertains to the obsolescence of knowledge (*Is this required anymore?*) and change refers to discarding of such obsolete knowledge (*how do we get rid of it*?). While one is the source, the other is the result. Hence, the second, fifth, and sixth stages of unlearning detailed above are addressed through this principle. Some of the steps suggested in an earlier section for discarding knowledge from human and non-human bins can also facilitate inquiry and change.

The poetic principle is unique to AI. It reinforces the fact that an organization’s past (history), present (performance), and future (vision) are endless sources of learning, inspiration, and interpretation. It is unique as it nurtures the creative spirit of individuals by encouraging them to describe their experiences and opinions using their own terminologies and adjectives, and provides autonomy of interpretation (the poetic license). This helps in unearthing and transferring the tacit knowledge of individuals and groups that are often outcomes of experience and individual judgment rather than a set of theories or stated rules. As per this principle, it is possible to inquire into the nature of alienation or joy, enthusiasm or low morale, efficiency or excess, or any other organization-related issues. The following points represent some steps to operationalize this principle in the context of unlearning:

- **Story telling sessions** (Messerschmidt, 2008) are extremely fruitful for transferring tacit knowledge. We can benefit from the various information and communication technologies by documenting positive experiences of key personnel and sharing the same with employees.

- **Images and pictures** can depict the desired future of the organization, e.g., creating an image to show how satisfied the organization wants its customers to be. A simplistic representation could be... ☺. However, the organization can invest time on creatively representing the same. These images get coded in employees’ memory and there is little ambiguity in interpreting them.

- **Spiritual themes** can also be used as highlights for explaining past success. These themes exist subconsciously and hence need to be triggered for better interpretation of individual and collective belief. These steps can be helpful in addressing the first four stages of unlearning mentioned above.

The principle of *anticipation* is built on the fact that images of future drive what might be called the current behaviour of any organization. Here, future is powerfully brought into the present as a mobilizing agent. Thus anticipation is a potent generative force that drives organizations towards its desired destiny. The future
events can be with reference to individuals, groups, or organizations, the alignment of which is essential. Unlearning acts as a catalyst for realizing this dream. Organizations can address this at multiple levels, as illustrated here.

At the routine level, organizations can make structural changes by:

- Deploying employees to different department/roles to help overcome emotional investment in old ways of working which hinder unlearning of routines.
- Rearranging machines/equipments in an order that will facilitate the flow of the new task/routine/process can further reinforce this unlearning.
- Creating a ‘fool-proof’ mechanism that helps employees avoid slipping back/reverting to their old task/routine/process.

At the belief level, organizations can get employees’ buy-in through:

- Logical discussions regarding the advantages of the suggested task/routine/process over the existing one to convince employees about the new routine.
- Events to celebrate each milestone. This helps employees relate to the overall picture of the future of their organization and thereby secure commitment to the initiative.
- Upfront communication to employees that this revised process/routine may not be the final one and the organization is open to modify the same, which will help overcome resistance to unlearning at the belief level.

Research from diverse fields substantiates the power of positive imagery to generate positive action (Cooperride and Srivastva, 1987). For example, in the medical field, a well-documented placebo effect results from people’s positive expectancy about the healing effect. Classical research in the field of education brought to light the ‘pygmalion effect’, where teachers were told that some students had high potential when in fact they were no different from other students; the supposedly high potential students were later found to have outperformed their classmates. Since AI is not a deficit-based theory but a strength-based theory, the focus on positive imagery, the fifth principle, is key to its success. Anticipating a favourable behaviour of the self makes it easier to get rid of the existing knowledge and accept new knowledge, which forms the basis for individual unlearning (French, Bell and Zawacki, 2005). Organizations can facilitate this through the use of self-awareness initiatives such as sensitivity training, T-groups training, etc., focusing on identifying strengths and opportunities. The fourth and fifth principles of anticipation and positive imagery foster generative competencies that guide individuals and groups to anticipate positive future events that would facilitate steps (5) and (6) in the unlearning process.

The Process of AI

AI occurs through four processes (4Ds), viz., Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Each of these stages is characterized by some facilitating as well as inhibiting factors which could affect unlearning in various ways. It is aptly referred to as the 4-D cycle as it is a continuous process that is iterative in nature.

Discover: The discover stage describes the best features and attributes of an organization, reflects on its peak experiences, and focuses on what gives life to people, their work, and the organization (French, Bell and Zawacki, 2005). In any of the levels of unlearning, (individual, group or organization), discovering is essential in order to:

- identify knowledge that was relevant/useful in the past by discovering processes and events that contributed to success then (e.g., staff attitude, or any initiative that proved to be successful in the past)
- discover the current obsoleteness of such knowledge by evaluating the extent of its relevance to the present context.

This is also known as the parenthetic learning model for unlearning as provided by Klein (1989). According to Klein, parenthetic learning model is superior to other models of unlearning as it includes the element of context, that is, a specific response can be learned or unlearned but its effectiveness is limited to its relevance to the context in which it is applied. Thus the Discover stage will help unlearning by creating a question of relevance, since the obsolete nature of knowledge is itself dynamic, depending on the context. This phase also helps in distinguishing between obsolete and relevant knowledge which comprise the first two stages in unlearning: (1) individual, group or organization to identify the existing knowledge, and (2) individual, group or organiza-
tion to recognize the obsoleteness of such existing knowledge. Among the five principles governing the AI approach (constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, and positive), the Discover stage is dominated by the principles of construction and simultaneity. The content as well as the context are the result of perceived and constructed realities of individuals and this stage begins the inquiry or the questioning process which simultaneously sows the seed for change. An open culture and positive reinforcement would facilitate this stage, while lack of individual interest will inhibit or stifle discovery.

**Dream:** The dream stage involves envisioning what the organization might ideally look like in the future. The Discover stage acts as a platform for the dream or vision to be grounded in the potential of organizations (French, Bell and Zawacki, 2005). Since the dream is for the organization as a whole, it demands shared values, mission, and vision, which implies expression and consent from group members. The constructed realities of individuals get shared among group members. It is at this stage that individual unlearning percolates to the group level and later up to the organizational level. If the group does not support individual realization of obsolete knowledge for reasons other than rationale, such individual unlearning sparks might fade and die away, which Hedberg (1981) describes as “little deaths at the micro level.” Thus, while using AI as an intervention, care should be taken to form groups that have high level of synergies. It would definitely be unrealistic to expect ideal teams in organizations, with perfect synergy, no friction, and/or perfect rationality. However, teams with high levels of synergy and comparatively low levels of dysfunctional friction would definitely facilitate this stage. The Dream stage facilitates the third and the fourth steps in the unlearning process: (3) individuals to express obsoleteness of knowledge to group/organization, and (4) group/organization to recognize such obsoleteness of knowledge. A team that is rational in its approach and has shared understanding of norms and values facilitates the dream stage. On the other hand, friction, lack of synergy among team members, and communication barriers would detract from the value of this stage. The fundamental premise in which we present AI as a more suitable and appropriate intervention tool is its ability to minimize resistance to change and unlearning. Lack of reasonable level of rationality and synergy may work against this fundamental premise.

An important benefit of the dream phase is that sharing knowledge through experiences brings out the tacit nature of knowledge, which is not possible through other non-group-based approaches. The poetic principle of AI that nurtures creative spirit of individuals and provides autonomy of interpretation helps to create a dream that is drawn from organizational strengths. Unlearning explicit knowledge which is coded and available in theory is relatively easier than unlearning tacit knowledge that exists only in the minds of individuals. The combination of poetic license (individual interpretation), dream phase (future of the organization), and group consensus (shared interpretation) of both explicit and tacit knowledge and its obsolete nature, makes AI a more suitable approach to unlearning. This phase brings out the collaborative competencies required for unlearning.

**Design:** In order to support the dream articulated in the previous phase, organizational structures, routines, processes, and relationships are created in the design phase. Here, the attention shifts from ‘what is’ to ‘what should be.’ This creates provocative competencies for the organization. An action plan is created that is crafted with bold positive statements, language, imagery, etc. The dreams articulated in the previous phase have to now find expressions through the design statements. Though this phase appears to be similar to other interventions where an action plan is created, one significant differentiator is the basis on which these plans/designs are created. In the AI process, individual experiences and anticipated positive future is fundamental to designing, which results in high levels of participation and commitment to the design. Thus, the design phase is dominated by the principles of poetic (expressing individual experiences), anticipatory, and positive imagery. The ‘how’ of accomplishing dreams is detailed in this phase. It is in the design phase that the last two steps of unlearning is executed: (5) individual, group or organization to resist or avoid the application of such obsolete knowledge, and (6) substitution of new knowledge in place of old knowledge. Visible support from top management, expertise, and continuous communication will act as facilitators in the design phase.

**Destiny:** This being the last phase of the AI cycle, aims to sustain the developments of the first three phases and ensures a collective sense of achieving the desired result. The knowledge (relevant and obsolete) identified at the discovery stage, the vision developed through the
dream phase, and the action plan laid out during the design stage, form the foundation for the destiny stage. This stage is driven predominantly by employees’ commitment to the overall design. As the AI approach relies on the positive core of the organization, the destiny must ensure that this positive core becomes the common and explicit property of everyone in the organization (Vuuren and Crous, 2005). As the entire AI process is iterative in nature, once the destiny phase is over, the discovery phase for the subsequent appreciative learning journey begins. The congruent principles of anticipation and positive imagery are the driving forces behind the destiny phase. Figure 1 depicts the 4-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.

The 4-D cycle is aptly referred to as a cycle, as the process of AI is a continuous one, much like the process of learning and unlearning. Though all the five principles (constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, and positive) play a role in each of the 4-D cycle, some principles are more predominant as compared to others in different stages of the cycle. Table 1 provides an easy understanding of the role of AI in each of the 4-D stages in facilitating unlearning.

Table 1A: Description of the 4-D Cycle of AI and its Applicability to Organizational Unlearning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Phases of AI (4D)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Dream</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Predominant AI Principle</strong></td>
<td>Constructionist &amp; Simultaneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unlearning Level</strong></td>
<td>Predominantly individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competencies</strong></td>
<td>Generative competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitators</strong></td>
<td>Culture of openness, Positive reinforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inhibitors</strong></td>
<td>Lack of individual interest, Group friction, Barriers in communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unique Advantages</strong></td>
<td>Focus on strengths and thus help overcome resistance, Share through experiences and thus help encode tacit knowledge along with explicit knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unlearning Stages</strong></td>
<td>Stages 1 &amp; 2 (1) individual/group/organization to identify existence of knowledge, and (2) individual/group/organization to recognize the obsoleteness of such existing knowledge</td>
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</tbody>
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PRACTICAL RELEVANCE

At a time when the economies across the globe are facing financial crises, when growth rates are declining rapidly, when business opportunities that were once overflowing are fast drying up, organizations that will survive are the ones that have learnt to adapt. Organizations need to shift away from their routines and beliefs to cater to the current context. Given the fact that unemployment rate in India is at 7.6 per cent accounting for 5,98,000 job cuts, being the highest in the last 16 years (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2009), recruitment consultants represent an example of businesses that have been hard hit in their operations. While a lot of these consultants have either given up on business or decided to market themselves more aggressively to increase the client base, a few have expanded their service offerings. One such consultant that provides job placement for engineers in IT companies has decided to expand their service offerings by taking on staffing of house-maids, sweepers, cooks, etc., in addition. This involves a significant shift in belief. In terms of routines too, they no longer follow e-mails or resume system for this particular category of staffing, as they are predominantly not educated and not computer-literate. While many top organizations lay off employees, a few organizations have invested time and effort to channelize/expand their services and redeploy employees. Such change in roles/services calls for an attitude to unlearn as well as learn. Such unlearning-learning cycles are prevalent across organizations in all sectors. While many approaches to learning or adding knowledge is available, questions such as how organizations get rid of routines that are no longer required, how organizations discard beliefs that are no longer pertinent, how organizations dispose physical artifacts that are no longer relevant, etc., require an in-depth understanding of organizational unlearning. This paper not only describes the unlearning process but also suggests certain methods based on the AI approach, for facilitating unlearning. It is more essential for organizations with sizable employee strength, proven history of success and low employee turnover to focus on unlearning as they are prone to get trapped in existing routines and beliefs. They find it a challenge to move away from already set routines and beliefs, thus making them stagnant or sometimes even leading to decline. It is expected that the above discussions will help organizations to consider the novel approach of AI in the light of unlearning. The suggested steps for managers in executing each of the five AI principles are a unique contribution that can be applied across all organizations. Moreover, an awareness of possible hindrances and facilitators would help managers in organizations to take appropriate measures for unlearning.

CONCLUSION

As AI involves using past success to shape future, and unlearning is all about eliminating prior learning, the relevance of using AI for unlearning in organizations might be difficult to comprehend. However, it is important to note that unlearning is concerned only with obsolete knowledge; relevant knowledge is not unlearned. And the reason for referring to past success is to instill a sense of positivity that not only brings out insights on existing knowledge and its contextual relevance but also helps in overcoming resistance among individuals/groups. Overcoming resistance is considered a key challenge for unlearning. It is well understood and accepted that any change initiative will meet with resistance. However, the resistance to unlearn is higher than the resistance to learn. Resistance to learning is restricted to the uncertainty of consequences of ‘new’ knowledge/practices/roles, etc., whereas resistance to unlearning includes the unwillingness to ‘let go’ of old practices/knowledge, besides the uncertain consequences of new knowledge/practices/roles. Therefore, an approach that provides a positive, affirmative, and pleasant beginning note that can hopefully minimize resistance is considered a more appropriate intervention for unlearning. The limiting factors to this approach might be the existing organizational culture, leadership, and management style of the organization. With a culture that provides no room for openness and free flow of communication, with a leadership style that stifles innovation and breeds rigidity in practices and procedures, with a management that is not enthused enough to move forward and unwilling to support employee initiatives, any approach to change will fail and an approach to unlearn will fail miserably. As AI is deeply rooted in a positive world-view, organizations should progress towards living, learning, and unlearning the ‘appreciative inquiry way’ for this approach to be successful. As noted by Cooperrider (2006), the approach would be expected to be helpful to organizations to create an alignment of strength so that the weaknesses become irrelevant, as well as for already positive organizations to move to a more positive state.
REFERENCES


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