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The feedforward interview

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), we offer an interview protocol termed Feedforward Interview (FFI). FFI is designed to reveal new organizational knowledge both for managers and subordinates, which can lead to better alignment between employees' needs and organizational practices, and to improved relationships by enabling both parties to feel more positive about themselves and about each other. Following a detailed description of the FFI protocol and its rationale, we demonstrate how FFI may be used as a complement, or even as a replacement, for performance appraisal reviews, job selection interviews, and customer satisfaction surveys. The benefits of FFI appear to include eliciting positive emotions, fostering bonding, building psychological safety for sharing information, and creating internal transformations of both interviewer and interviewee. We conclude with a call for research to evaluate FFI's effectiveness and the conditions under which it will be most useful.

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1. Introduction

During a feedforward workshop which we conducted for approximately 30 high-school principals, one of the principals got up at the beginning of the second session and said excitedly: "I must tell you what happened to me. I tried the feedforward interview with an employee I had already decided to dismiss, and asked him to tell me about an event at work during which he felt at his best. In response, he told me that for quite some time now he had felt that his performance was not satisfactory. He then went on to explain all the remedial steps he had taken and how great he felt about the changes he had made." The principal further added: "following the feedforward interview, I saw him in a new light, and discovered new things about him that I could not have imagined beforehand". She was very glad to tell her colleagues that instead of having to go through an agonizing dismissal process, she discovered that he could turn into a productive and valuable employee.

In light of this story, what would have happened if the principal had not conducted a feedforward interview, but instead had carried out a traditional performance-appraisal interview and given her employee feedback on his performance? Imagine what the response of the employee would have been, had the principal presented him with a performance-appraisal form indicating that his performance was poor or unsatisfactory? In all likelihood, the encounter would have deteriorated into an anxious-ridden argument that would have prevented both parties from learning something new about each other. Furthermore, any chance of having an amicable work-relationship between them in the future would have been jeopardized, perhaps for good (Coens & Jenkins, 2000). The feedforward story described above depicts a different kind of interaction, an interaction in which the employee did most of the talking and the principal was able to acquire new insights into his capabilities, objectives and actions. As a result, both parties were willing to re-consider their view of each other, and a hopeful and enthusiastic forecast for the future was created.

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In this paper, we present the Feedforward Interview (FFI), which is based on the Appreciative Interview component of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), and provide a detailed description of the FFI protocol, its rationale, and its different applications in organizational settings. The goals of FFI are to (a) facilitate positive change by sparking a self-evaluation of one's current behavior and plans in relation to one's strengths and proven practices, (b) enrich the interviewer's knowledge of the interviewee's strengths and the conditions that facilitate the expression of these strengths in the organization, and (c) build and improve the relationship, existing or new, between interviewer and interviewee. We propose that FFI may be useful as a complement, or even as a replacement, for the following organizational processes: feedback interventions (e.g., performance appraisal review; coaching with 360-degree feedback), job selection interviews, career planning sessions, customer satisfaction surveys, and strength-based strategy development. We begin by describing the conceptual underpinnings of FFI and present a full step-by-step protocol for conducting FFI. Next, we report some case studies to demonstrate its application, offer a theoretical account of the putative mechanism triggered by FFI, and conclude with a call for programmatic research to evaluate FFI.

1.1. *The conceptual underpinnings of FFI*

FFI is based on the Appreciative Interview component of Appreciative Inquiry (e.g., Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a comprehensive organizational intervention that requires consensus building around it and a major organizational commitment to the process. The basic idea of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is to build organizations around what works, instead of focusing on fixing what's wrong. In some of its advanced forms – the AI summit – it climaxes in a whole-organizational conference spanning over three to five days (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffin, 2003). The first stage of AI (the Discovery stage) includes the Appreciative Interview, which is viewed as a central component in the AI philosophy and process. Specifically, the Appreciative Interview is considered (a) among the “non-negotiable aspects of Appreciative Inquiry” (b) a core component that “differentiates Appreciative Inquiry from other approaches to organizational change”, and (c) “must be done for Appreciative Inquiry process to succeed” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 147).

The purpose of the Appreciative Interview is to bring the positive aspects of employee experiences into focus and discover what processes work well in the organization. This is accomplished by first eliciting stories of concrete successes, that is, stories regarding instances and events in which employees were at their best, and then by inquiring into the facilitating conditions that allowed them to perform at their best. To construct FFI, we have extracted this essence of Appreciative Interview from the AI process, and modified it to create a stand-alone tool that can be used for the benefit of ongoing managerial and Human Resource (HR) activities. In doing so, we are able to bring the process of discovering what works best in the organization into dyadic dialogue and use it first to create the knowledge of best practices, and then to build further alignment between this newly discovered knowledge and one's implicit behavior tendencies or explicit plans for the future. As it stands, FFI requires little training, is easy to implement and can be used for different purposes by all levels of the organizational echelon.

While at the core of the Appreciative Interview is the notion of eliciting stories of success, some variations in the specific content of the interview questions do exist. For example, some versions asks about emotions (e.g., “What did it feel like?”; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 151), whereas other protocols omit questions about feelings and inquire into the details of the event (e.g., “What was going on?”; Ludema et al., 2003, p. 264). Our version of the Appreciative Interview that is incorporated into the FFI protocol retains the original spirit of Appreciative Inquiry, and at the same time is guided by four theoretical considerations: (1) utilizing the advantages of episodic memory in eliciting success stories (e.g., Robinson & Clore, 2002), (2) incorporating a win-win approach that focuses on maintaining employee-organization alignment (e.g., Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), (3) formally adding the benefits of active listening to the process (e.g., Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006), and finally (4) using the motivating force of cognitive discrepancies to facilitate change (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981). While the first consideration is well established within the AI approach, the other considerations add new perspectives to the process, which are unique to FFI.

In the next section we present a detailed description of the FFI protocol, accompanied by specified guidelines and considerations for the interviewer. Then we further discuss each of the four theoretical considerations that have shaped the FFI and show how each may influence the effectiveness of the interview¹.

1.2. *Feedforward step-by-step*

1.2.1. *The protocol*

Table 1 presents the protocol of the FFI. The columns on the left are the interview questions. These simple questions can be used to obtain FFI benefits with untrained interviewers. The right column provides additional directions and considerations for interviewers who have already experienced the questions in the left columns. The aim of these directions is to yield a deeper and more meaningful interview, although they are optional. That is, we are suggesting the protocol as an easy-to-implement interview to be used by managers. The directions and considerations can serve as general guidelines for managers who feel comfortable with them, and for professionals (HR specialists, organizational psychologists, coaches) who are experienced in interviewing. Below we discuss the specific theoretical considerations embedded both in the protocol and in the directions and considerations columns.

¹ It is noteworthy that the FFI protocol presented here evolved through multiple iterations and some of the examples in this paper were produced with previous versions of this protocol. Nevertheless, from the beginning the protocol was delivered with the same theoretical considerations as described above.

Table 1
FFI protocol (left column) and directions and considerations for the interviewer (right column).

FFI Protocol	Directions and considerations
<p><i>Step 1 – Eliciting a success story</i></p> <p>Address your interviewee with the following statement: “I am sure that you have had both negative and positive experiences at work. Today, I would like to focus only on the positive aspects of your experiences.”</p> <p>Ask your interviewee the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Could you please tell me a story about an experience at work during which you felt at your best, full of life and in flow, and you were content even before the results of your actions became known?” 2. “Would you be happy to experience a similar process again?” 3. “What was the peak moment of this story? What did you think at that moment?” 4. “How did you feel at that moment (including your emotional and physiological reaction)?” 	<p>Sit face to face, preferably without a barrier between you, and without any papers, pens or pencils in your hands, so that you will be able to concentrate entirely on the interview process.</p> <p>The story elicited at this point is the basis of the intervention. Therefore, it is important to make sure you hear a specific story (i.e., specific details such as time, space, and action), rather than a summary of an event or a generalization (i.e., “I usually enjoy...”). <i>Active listening:</i> Reflect the story back to the interviewee by summarizing the story in your own words. Then ask: “Did I miss anything in the story?”, and “Do you want to add anything else?” (If there are corrections or additions reflect them as well).</p> <p>If the interviewee answers YES, continue to the next question, as the story most likely holds information that is worthwhile inquiring into and learning from. However, if the interviewee answers NO, ask for another story that the interviewee would be happy to experience once again.</p> <p>Make sure you hear the details of a single peak or two at most. The question about thoughts is designed to help some interviewees relate to the next questions.</p> <p>If the interviewee describes positive emotions, reflect the emotions back and proceed. However, if the interviewee describes negative emotions, or mixed feelings, ask for another story, and start over with question 1. When people are asked to describe how they felt in a certain situation, they sometimes report a thought they had rather than an emotion. If this is the case with your interviewee, simply acknowledge their thought and ask again about the emotions they experienced. Some interviewees describe the emotions in general terms (e.g., “I felt good”), if so ask for the details of the feeling including how the interviewee felt these emotions in the body. <i>Active listening:</i> Reflect the emotions back to the interviewee.</p>
<p><i>Step 2 – Discovering your personal success code</i></p> <p>Ask your interviewee the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “What were the conditions in you, such as things you did, your capabilities and your strengths that made this story possible? “ 2. “What did others do that enabled this story?” 3. “What were the conditions facilitated by the organization (even physical or temporal) that enabled this story”? 	<p>To elicit the underlying conditions that facilitated the interviewee’s best performance – his or her personal code of success– it is important to reveal as many diverse conditions as possible.</p> <p>Therefore, make sure the interviewee recognizes and describes facilitating conditions in him or her, in others and in the organization.</p> <p><i>Active Listening:</i> Reflect the conditions back to the interviewee. For a full and rich description of facilitating conditions, encourage your interviewee to reveal more conditions by asking “...and what else?” - until you have confirmed that all the conditions in the mind of the interviewee are accounted for.</p>
<p><i>Step 3 – The feedforward question</i></p> <p>State the following to your interviewee: “The conditions you have just described seem to be your personal code for reaching [insert the key achievement in the story, e.g., happiness at work, optimal performance, or outstanding leadership].</p> <p>Add the question: “If this is so, think of your current actions, priorities and plans for the near future (e.g., next quarter), and consider to what extent they incorporate all of these conditions.”</p>	<p>Depending on the situation the answer to this question may either be elaborated and discussed in detail or left as a question for the interviewee to ponder privately.</p>

1.2.2. Theoretical considerations shaping the FFI protocol and additional guidelines

1.2.2.1. Episodic memory. One principle that differentiates useful appreciative interviews from non-useful ones is the successful elicitation of a detailed story (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). All versions of Appreciative Interview as well as the general approach of AI emphasize the importance of relying on stories. Stories provide a specific contextualization of the information supplied by the interviewee. The more the interviewee recalls a detailed episode, as opposed to providing generalizations, the more useful will be the success code elicited in Step 2. The data gleaned from episodic memory is different from data retrieved from semantic memory (Robinson & Clore, 2002). For example, when people are asked how happy they are in general, Americans report higher levels of happiness than Asians do, but when people are asked how they feel at a given moment there are no

differences between these groups. Similarly, people report that in general women during menstruation are in a worse mood, but mood reported on-line by women at different days of the cycle is largely the same (Robinson & Clore, 2002). One explanation for these discrepancies is that emotional memory gleaned from semantic memory is susceptible to normative influence, and it is generalized, whereas episodic memory is closest to on-line experience and is based on specific event memories. Therefore, an inquiry into specific details of an episode is likely to generate unique knowledge that is not stored in existing generalizations, and insights gleaned from a specific episode may spark new insights. These new insights and transformation of knowledge are both keys to successful AI interventions (Bushe & Kassam, 2005) and the goals of the FFI. Therefore, the interviewer is directed to seek a detailed story. For example, an interviewee who says, “Usually, when I do X, I enjoy my work” is actually sharing an implicit theory, or semantic knowledge, and not a story retrieved from episodic memory. In this case, the interviewer is advised to ask: “Could you give me an example of such an event”?

It is important to note that retrieval of episodic memory is the memory function most damaged in depressed people (Zakzanis, Leach, & Kaplan, 1998). Specifically, “People with major depression often show difficulty in retrieving specific autobiographical memories ... When asked to remember a specific event from their lives in response to a cue word (e.g., “happy”), individuals with depression show an overgeneral memory bias ..., that is, they tend to reply with descriptions that summarize several different events (e.g., “I am always happy when I visit friends”) rather than a specific instance (“I was happy when my school friend rang me last week”).” (Kleim & Ehlers, 2008, p. 231). Thus, it is possible that the request to use episodic memory in FFI counteracts depressive symptoms among normal interviewees. Nevertheless, this points to some potential difficulties in the application of FFI with depressed individuals, an issue which we consider in the discussion.

1.2.2.2. A Win-win approach. The concept of a win-win, or an integrative approach originates from literature on inter-personal negotiation, and denotes an approach in which the negotiating parties show concern both for their own outcomes and for the outcomes of others, and therefore collaborate to reach mutual gain. However, most people do not negotiate very well and typically tend to reach win-lose outcomes, in which the needs of one party are met at the expense of the unmet needs of the other party (e.g., Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Arriving at win-lose or compromise outcomes is often the result of negotiators failing to realize they have compatible interests and settling for solutions that are sub-optimal for both parties (Neale & Bazerman, 1991). Whether win-win or win-lose, it seems we can have a negotiation not only between two people, but also within ourselves, between different aspects or voices in the self (Nir, 2008). These intra-personal negotiations are parallel to inter-personal negotiations in that they can either result in win-win or in win-lose outcomes. In win-lose internal negotiations some of the person's needs are met at the expense of other important needs that remain unsatisfied. In contrast, win-win outcomes within the self are those in which all the diverse needs of the person are met at the same time. Moreover, people who tend to resolve inner conflicts with a win-win approach appear happier and more adept at interpersonal negotiation (Nir, 2008). Given the desirability of a win-win approach, our protocol is designed to elicit knowledge regarding win-win conduct in an organizational setting.

We suggest that a typical Appreciative Interview may occasionally yield win-lose stories regarding some sort of victory, in which for instance the employee was successful at accomplishing an assignment, but did so at the expense of others, or in which some needs of the employee were met at the expense of other needs. For example, consider the following success story of an HR manager in a high-tech company. His story described a training project he successfully organized that won him accolades from his superiors. However, when asked how he felt during the training, before receiving praise from his superior, he responded with: “It was hell”. In other words, the result was successful (i.e., creating an internal “win”), but the process was not (i.e., creating an internal “lose” at the same time). In an attempt to find a win-win story, we asked the HR manager for another story in which he felt great at work. However, he could not remember any such story, so we asked for a story in which he felt full of life outside of work. He easily answered this, recalling a playful afternoon he spent rolling with his two sons on the grass, which gave him a good feeling in the process. Next, we asked whether he ever had a similar feeling while working on a training project. In response, he recalled a story about a training program he organized that was done “jamboree” style, which was both fun to prepare and was highly evaluated at the end. This story depicts a win-win story, in which both his need to be successful and his wish to enjoy his work were met, and at the same time the needs of the organization to have quality training were satisfied as well.

Therefore, to avoid focusing on, and learning from, sub-optimal win-lose stories, the FFI has incorporated two additions to the interview: The first question now ends with “...and you were content even before the results of your actions became known?”, thus restricting the story to one that is not only outcome-successful, but also process-successful. In addition, question 2 of Step 1 specifically checks whether the type of process that occurred within the story is such that the interviewee would like to experience again in the future. This set of guidelines helps to recall an event during which the employee demonstrated extraordinary performance without compromising either the needs of others or of the self in the processes.

Stories of win-lose situations often contain elements of overpowering and defeating others, or parts of the self. These win-lose stories are easily observable in either how people describe elements of their story (i.e., “I showed them”), or in the feelings they report (“I was excited, but also very frustrated”). These are stories with bitter emotional components. The totality of the emotions, we assume on the basis of the “somatic marker hypothesis” (Damasio, 1995), reflect an amalgam of various inputs present in situations. Thus, we assume that peak moments characterized by overwhelmingly positive emotions (such as happiness, warmth, elation, connectedness, flow) indicate that most, if not all, elements of the story are positive. That is, stories culminating in predominantly positive emotions are presumed to be stories of win-win with other members of the organization as well as stories of win-win among multiple needs within the individual (Nir, 2008). Therefore, in Step 1, question 4 checks whether the interviewee experienced predominantly positive emotions, or mixed emotions, at the peak of the story. If the emotions are not overwhelmingly positive, we recommend soliciting another story to guarantee the story is a win-win story.

Finally, in probing the conditions that facilitated the story in Step 2 of the process, we also want to discover all the contributors that helped the interviewee create an optimal, win-win story. Therefore, the interviewer is guided to ascertain that the interviewee considers both conditions that reside within the interviewee and conditions that reside outside the interviewee, including other people. Some interviewees find it easy to recall conditions that seem to have been created by others, such as “my boss trusted me” or “I was given autonomy”, or “the team cooperated well”, but do not easily recall facilitating conditions within themselves. To enable them to validate their own contribution to their success, these interviewees should be asked: “In addition to these conditions, what was your own contribution to this story?” For example, a person who indicated “my boss trusted me” could be asked “what was there in you that led your boss to trust you?” or “what did you do that enabled your boss to trust you?”

Other interviewees find it easy to recall self-related conditions such as “I was courageous”, or “I believed in what I was doing”, however do not easily convey how others, or how the organization contributed to their success. In this case, interviewers should ask the interviewee: “was there any person that directly or indirectly contributed to this story?” Once again, the principle that guides the protocol is an integrative win-win approach. This is reflected in the design of the questions that direct the elicitation of a win-win story, and on the emphasis placed on acknowledging the success-facilitating conditions that stem both from the interviewee and from other people. Therefore, the protocol is designed to help interviewees recognize the win-win conditions that facilitated the story and hence help construct a mental map of a win-win approach. It is this mental map (of “I am using a win-win approach”) that we wish to help interviewees replicate in response to the feedforward question (see the section on cognitive comparisons below). It is also noteworthy that the process of eliciting the condition provides yet another potentially positive outcome—the creation of more favorable work conditions by the interviewer. Upon hearing the conditions required by the interviewee to thrive at work, managers can gain new knowledge of what they can do to facilitate optimal working conditions for their employees, and thus further increase the win-win potential between the employees and the organization.

1.2.2.3. Active listening. Active listening is the practice of putting one's values, opinions, and attitudes aside while trying to fully understand the message of the other, and probing for rich information from the other party while creating rapport. Active listening is recommended by practitioners as a means to generate win-win outcomes both in business (e.g., Covey, 1989) and in marriage (e.g., Hendrix, 1988), and is documented by researchers to be a good business practice (Drollinger et al., 2006). Therefore, our protocol suggests that interviewers reflect what they have heard by paraphrasing, asking for clarification and summarizing the content of the answers after every question. Although various practitioners recommend using active listening in the Appreciative Interview, we have formally incorporated it into the directions that accompany the FFI protocol. These reflective and active listening directions are specifically designed to increase the quality of the data shared in the FFI, to create a sense of shared reality (Echterhoff, Higgins & Groll, 2005) and to provide the interviewee with a feeling of being fully heard and understood.

1.2.2.4. Cognitive comparison and the feedforward question. Many researchers, working from different and even opposing theoretical views, agree that identifying discrepancies between goals (standards) and current states (feedback) create a motivation to act in order to reduce the discrepancy (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). However, most discrepancies do not receive attention and without attention there is no behavior change (Carver & Scheier, 1981). Once a discrepancy receives attention, people react with one of four possible responses: they change their behavior, change the standard, reject the feedback, or escape the field altogether (Mikulincer, 1994). One example of such a discrepancy that receives attention is an author whose manuscript is rejected although he regards it highly, thus revealing a discrepancy between the current state of the paper and standards as defined by the Journal. In response to this discrepancy, the author can (1) decide to work hard to revise the manuscript and submit it to another A journal, (2) lower his or her standards and send it to a low-grade journal, (3) conclude that the editor and the reviewers are stupid and resend the paper to another A journal without any revision, or (4) decide to change the research topic or even consider a change in career. Note that when feedback is provided by others, as in this example, the standard of the goal (i.e., what is acceptable) and the current state (i.e., the quality of the paper) are both external to the author. The author may or may not decide to adopt the standard and learn from the feedback.

In contrast to the above feedback processes, the feedforward question creates a comparison process by juxtaposing internal standards with internal practices and plans (comparing the future simulated from current practices and plans with the future simulated from the standards discovered in the story). Specifically, Step 2 promotes the discovery of internal standards of excellence by searching for the subjective conditions that lead to superior performance. Moreover, the standards are not only internal, and hence trustworthy, but they also reflect standards used when a person has experienced success in addressing multiple needs (internal win-win). Such internal standards are likely to have strong pull. Then, Step 3 sparks a process of internal comparisons by asking the interviewee to review his or her plans in light of the internal standards just discovered. Therefore, once a motivation is triggered to reduce the discrepancy, the validity of the information regarding both the standards and the current plans is likely to prevent reduction of the discrepancy through escape, rejection, or lowering of standards. Consequently, behavior is likely to change.

Our suggestion is consistent with research on fantasies and competence (Oettingen & Hagenah, 2005). This line of research has shown that fantasies do not lead to changes in performance unless coupled with high competence expectations. The use of recalled standards of best past performance in the feedforward process guarantees that the competence belief is relatively high. Hence fantasizing and envisioning new realities (i.e., alternative behaviors) that may come after the feedforward question are likely to generate change in behavior and improvement in performance because both the fantasy (i.e., how the future may look ideally) and the high competence belief (i.e., “I've already succeeded in doing this in the past”) are salient.

In some instances, FFI may be frustrating because it may expose standards that are necessary for optimal performance but are lacking in an individual's current situation. For example, an interviewee might recall “Having the full support of my boss” as a crucial condition for past success, and this same condition may be absent from his or her current job. In this case, an additional FFI

may be performed aimed at empowering the interviewee to overcome this frustration. For example, the interviewer could ask for a story about an instance in which the interviewee initially did not have support from the boss, yet eventually created it, and enjoyed the processes of generating this support. In this way, successive FFIs can build awareness of a growing number of strengths and capabilities the interviewee already possesses that could help close the gap(s) between his or her idiosyncratic code for optimal performance and the current working conditions. In this regard, the FFI functions as a developmental tool and can support a continuous process of self-enhancement and growth.

1.3. FFI in practice

While each of us interviewed hundreds of individuals with the FFI, here we chose to present several cases demonstrating how managers who were trained by us (some of them in a single session) were able to use the FFI to derive a variety of organizational benefits. The cases here demonstrate using FFI before performance appraisal, as a selection interview, and as a customer survey instrument.

1.3.1. Feedforward before feedback (performance appraisal)

To demonstrate the benefits of using FFI in the context of performance appraisal, consider the experiences of a branch manager and her vice-manager of an Israeli bank, whom after a short training session used an earlier version of the FFI protocol with some 25 employees. The interviews took place a couple of weeks before the annual performance appraisal that was mandated by headquarters. We were debriefed by the managers soon after they completed the process, and here are two of the stories they shared with us.

The branch manager interviewed a clerk who had received the bank's "outstanding worker" award every year for the previous 10 years. In response to a request to tell a story about an event during which the clerk felt good and was full of life at work, the clerk responded "but I've never felt like that at work!" While the branch manager was stunned and still considering her response, the clerk added, "Actually, I did feel great, once, when I was filling in for a first-level manager in the branch while he was sick". In light of the new information, which was expanded on in the dialogue that followed, the branch manager decided to promote this excellent clerk to a first-level management position. In this case, the FFI enabled a clerk labeled by her superiors as "excellent", but who was frustrated and unfulfilled, to be promoted and in turn to further promote the operations of the branch.

The vice-manager proceeded to tell us about an interview he conducted with a credit clerk assigned to working with small businesses. The clerk shared a success story regarding a decision to give a loan to a businessman who appeared risky but turned out to be a good investment. According to the clerk the conditions that allowed this story to evolve included: (a) insisting on getting to know the client personally before making a decision; (b) clear guidelines supplied by the bank; and (c) management support in making decisions in "grey areas". In this case, the conditions for optimal performance can be viewed as the clerk's code for success, from which she could learn which actions and processes work optimally for her. Furthermore, in all probability reconstructing these conditions will allow her to repeat her success in the future.

A closer examination of the conditions shows that while the first condition stems from the clerk's behavior (i.e. getting to know the client), the other two conditions are related to what works in the organization (i.e. clear guidelines and management support). In this regard, the vice-manager who interviewed the clerk, and who was also the clerk's direct superior, conveyed the following to us: "You must understand, I didn't sleep that night, because I couldn't stop thinking why does she only sometimes get management support ... that is, my support ... and not at all times?" In this case, the new knowledge the vice-manager acquired from the FFI apparently facilitated a reevaluation of his own management practices.

Next, we asked managers to describe what happened in the meetings with their employees regarding the annual performance-appraisal ratings. The branch manager, who had over 10 years of experience in conducting performance appraisal, noted that in previous years, she and her vice-manager often had to defend themselves and explain ratings that were somewhat short of the maximum-possible rating. However, they were surprised to find out that after the FFI, and unlike in previous years, not even one single employee argued about the ratings or asked to change them. The managers felt that the employees were not as concerned about the performance-appraisal ratings as they were in previous years since they had just been acknowledged and heard in the FFI.

We may conclude therefore that in this case, the deep-seated needs of the employees to be heard and to be seen as meaningful contributors to their organization were met during the FFI, and as a result the annual meeting regarding the ratings became less relevant to meeting these needs. The process these two managers underwent exemplifies an important principle of AI, which suggests that the process leads people to see the connection between the parts that make up the whole, rather than viewing each employee as an independent performer. That is, unlike the results of a typical performance appraisal, each of these managers not only prompted their employees to learn how to replicate the work conditions that foster well being and high performance, but they also learned something about their own role as managers in producing these conditions for their employees.

1.3.2. FFI as a selection interview

Due to its modular structure and the endless topics that can be explored in the interview process, we suggest FFI could also be used effectively in job interviews. Our experience has shown that the FFI could aid in meeting the interests of effective selection processes and at the same time leave a good impression on the candidates – both on those who will be hired and those who will be rejected. The only modification needed in order to apply FFI to job selection processes is to drop Step-3 of the protocol. For an example of how this is implemented, consider the case of a manager who applied FFI when interviewing candidates for a job that required providing computer support to students at our University. He designed the FFI with a question regarding a story in which the candidates provided great assistance to someone (in any field) and enjoyed it. At the end of the process, he reported that some

of the candidates, who had impressive computer knowledge, were overwhelmed by the question and could not answer it. In other words, they could not recall a time in which they enjoyed assisting someone. In these cases, it was immediately clear both to the candidates and to the interviewer that the candidates did not fit the job requirements. These interviews created both a very accurate gauge for the fit of the candidate to the job, while preserving the well-being of the rejected candidates. Note that the candidates could recognize that the job did not fit them merely through self-reflection on their answer to the question. In this way, the image of the hiring employer was enhanced because the employer was perceived as supporting the right decision for the candidate, rather than appearing as unjustly standing in the way of the candidate.

1.3.3. FFI as a customer survey tool which supports strategic thinking

While we have demonstrated how FFI can be used within an organization in different settings, we would also like to suggest that it can be applied effectively outside the organization, with customers, clients and suppliers. Specifically, we suggest that FFI can be used to learn what works in the organization, by interviewing those who come in close contact with its products, services, systems and procedures. The knowledge derived from such interviews may provide meaningful insights into the company's best practices that would otherwise remain untapped. For an example of using FFI to create a meaningful learning process with clients and customers, consider the case of an owner and manager of an aerobic dance studio who used FFI to interview her customers at the end of the training season. The manager designed the FFI to ask the clients about the best experiences they had at the studio. The clients proceeded to tell her different stories about their best experiences at the studio, many of which she had forgotten about, dismissed as trivial or was unaware of. The new understanding she was able to extract from the common facilitating conditions among all the stories was that when she offered her trainees personal attention and showed she cared about them individually, they had their best experience at the studio. When the manager checked these responses against the previous year's customer satisfaction surveys, she found that the questions in the survey were about issues such as satisfaction with the quality of the facility, punctuality, and contribution to fitness, but none pertained to her caring approach. In retrospect, according to this manager, the survey missed the crucial information about her business's strength and its strategic competence. In addition, asking herself the feedforward question helped direct her efforts at investing in her business where it mattered most for its success.

1.4. FFI impact: Theoretical rationale

To present a single theoretical explanation of FFI effects is similar to trying to explain feedback effects – a feat that has defeated researchers for over a century (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Nevertheless, our observations from conducting multiple FFI sessions suggest that the processes that are likely to be simultaneously triggered by FFI include activating positive emotions, fostering bonding, igniting an internal dialogue that allows for a mutual change of both interviewer and interviewee, and creating safety for sharing information and learning about shortcomings. Although these processes most likely operate in parallel and with multiple mutual influences, for exposition purposes we discuss each of the processes separately.

1.4.1. Positive emotions

FFI is suggested to arouse positive emotions among most participants because it allows the individual to recall being at his or her best in the past. This was demonstrated in an experiment that compared the emotions of three groups of participants: participants who were interviewed with FFI, participants who were interviewed with a neutral interview and participants who were not interviewed (Rechter, 2009). The results showed that the most positive emotions were reported in the FFI group, followed by the neutral interview group and finally by the non-interview group (Rechter, 2009).

Our observations further suggest that a positive emotional spiral may be initiated by the FFI between interviewee and interviewer. The spiral begins with the interviewee recalling a positive past experience. In response, the interviewer reacts positively to the positive emotions aroused in the interviewee (signaled by a smile, gaze, or laughter), which in turn augments the positive emotions of the interviewee.

All the above signs of positive affect appear to contribute to the attainment of multiple organizational interests. First, positive emotions are known to broaden our thinking, increase our openness to new information, our willingness to cooperate, and our creativity (Fredrickson, 2001) and at the same time reduce conflict (Barsade, 2002). Second, putting the person with more power in the dyad (the supervisor) in a positive mood is known to increase the likelihood of reaching a win-win outcome in non-equal dyadic negotiations (Anderson & Thompson, 2004). Moreover, being in a positive mood may increase the likelihood that the interviewee will be able to reach a win-win outcome in internal dialogues among multiple conflicting voices (Nir, 2008). Hence, these consequences of positive affect appear to address the organizational interests of improving performance and communication quality above and beyond what (HR) managers typically hope to attain with performance appraisal, selection interviews, and placement interviews.

1.4.2. Fostering bonding and communication

In addition to creating positive emotions, we suggest FFI contributes to satisfying the employee's need for belonging, which is known to be one of the deepest human needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When the superior and the subordinate know each other, the positive nature of the interview often helps to improve and deepen their relationship. Alternatively, when the superior and the subordinate are practically strangers to one another, it offers an opportunity to get to know each other. This can be particularly beneficial when either the interviewee is a job candidate or is a current employee who feels isolated and lonely at work.

1.4.3. Igniting innovation within the self

Self theorists have recently described the self-concept as being like a theater, containing multiple characters or voices which are in continual dialogue and typically aim at influencing each other through back and forth negotiation. Each voice relays a meaningful narrative and point of view, and functions in a relatively autonomous way, and while some of the voices are dominant and at the foreground, others are dormant and wait their turn to be on stage (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; Hermans, 1996; Hermans & Kempen, 1998). According to this view, innovation takes place within the self when voices which were part of the system, but were either deeply layered or in the background, are reawakened and move to the foreground. This process of innovation changes the previous organization of the self, and generates new knowledge and self-enhancement (Hermans, 1996).

We suggest that the FFI supports the creation of innovation within the self as it reawakens often dormant, yet vital voices that represent one at one's best. By reawakening these voices and inviting them to take center stage, other and even opposing voices must update their responses and hence a new inner dialogue is triggered and innovation is created within the self. Furthermore, by having the interviewer listen to the reawakened voice, acknowledge it sincerely and ask different questions about it, this voice is further solidified and affirmed (Echterhoff, et al., 2005). Innovation within the self is set in motion once again by the feedforward question which is addressed in the final stage of the FFI. The feedforward question explicitly juxtaposes the newly reawakened voices with other voices, which represent one's plans and practices and which previously dominated the inner stage. Indirect support for this proposition was found in the FFI experiment reported above, where those interviewed with FFI agreed much more with the statement "I learned from the interview" than people interviewed with a neutral interview (Rechter, 2009).

1.4.4. Creating psychological safety for learning about shortcomings

Focusing on the positive and listening to the interviewee often reduces anxiety and allows the interviewees to enjoy a positive reflection of their selves (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005). This serves as an affirmation of their social standing and the building of psychological safety. In turn, the positive experience allows one to share with others and to bring to consciousness difficult aspects of the self while searching for ways to change. This observation is consistent with laboratory findings showing that participants who were induced to be in a good mood were more willing to explore negative aspects of the self (Trope & Pomerantz, 1998). In this way, the organization's goal of having employees learn about their shortcomings and correct them can be gained without the typical psychological threat and resistance pattern that characterizes employee-performance appraisals.

2. Discussion

Overall, FFI is a flexible interview process that aims to improve . . . and that can be used for different organizational objectives, in different organizational settings. FFI includes three steps which focus on the elicitation of a specific story regarding "full of life" experience at work, a reflection on the emotions involved, an analysis of the facilitating conditions of that story, and a feedforward question comparing plans to the just-discovered facilitating conditions. FFI offers a theory-based modification of the Appreciative Interview, and specifically emphasizes aspects such as gleaning a detailed story from the interviewee (thus using episodic memory), supporting the discovery of a win-win story, actively listening to the interviewee, and triggering a discrepancy between the internal standard for optimal conduct and one's behavior and plans. In addition, we reported several cases showing the possible applications of FFI for different managerial objectives. These include using FFI as a...before formal evaluation processes ("feedforward before feedback"), as a selection interview, as an instrument to collect data from customers, and to generate strategic thinking. Finally, we provided hypotheses regarding the possible effects and outcomes of FFI, which include experiencing positive emotions, bonding, gaining new knowledge, and creating a psychologically safe climate. We next suggest that these hypothesized FFI outcomes and effects should be examined and evaluated empirically. However, to formulate the most effective research avenues, several research questions and considerations must first be addressed. Below we discuss several such considerations.

2.1. A Call for research

To advance a comprehensive understanding of the effects of FFI, we suggest that the following research issues should be considered: research method (quantitative vs. qualitative or experiential), research goal (testing theoretical processes vs. testing applied effectiveness for HR and other organizational goals), types of dependent variables (cognitive vs. affective), constituency (the interviewee, interviewer or the dyad), and research approach (focusing on confirmation or on limitations and falsification). We believe that all of these poles are worthy of exploration. Next, we briefly touch on these issues while pointing out specific research directions.

2.1.1. Quantitative and qualitative or experiential research methods

Some authors have suggested that the AI approach, which serves as the basis for FFI, excludes the possibility of testing its fundamental arguments with quantitative methods (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). However Bushe and Kassam (2005) were able to successfully evaluate the effects of AI in a field study, using organization-wide meta-case analyses. The results of their study showed that a meaningful organizational change had occurred in 7 out of 20 organizations, and that such changes were contingent on the transformation in the understanding of the organizations by multiple stakeholders. Also, Rechter (2009) was able to successfully evaluate the effects of FFI on mood and learning in a laboratory experiment. Therefore, in the spirit of positive organizational scholarship (Roberts et al., 2005), we suggest that FFI and its effectiveness could be and should be empirically evaluated both with experiential and quantitative methods.

2.1.2. Applied and theoretical research

2.1.2.1. Applied Research: Selection. In considering applications of FFI, the clearest evaluation perhaps could be done in selection and placement settings. FFI purportedly reveals new knowledge, and thus information gleaned from interviewees may be a unique and valid predictor of performance. Therefore, when FFI is used for selection, as in the example we gave above of using FFI to identify candidates who would do well in providing computer support services, a structured rating form could be supplied to the interviewer, followed by a validation study. That is, one could assess how well FFI based scores predict various existing performance criteria (e.g., in our example, the performance criteria could be customer satisfaction with the service provider). In organizations in which a validated selection battery already exists, a FFI based score could be tested for possible incremental validity. Moreover, applicants could be questioned after the interview regarding their attitude towards the interviewing employer (for a review of measures and limitations of this attitude outcome, see Sackett & Lievens, 2008).

2.1.2.2. Applied Research: Feedforward before Feedback. Comparing FFI to traditional performance appraisal reviews is tricky because performance appraisal reviews have questionable utility (Coens & Jenkins, 2000; Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005). Nevertheless, FFI effectiveness may be assessed by examining managers' reactions to existing performance appraisals that are conducted with or without a preceding FFI. Such initial attempts have already been carried out, independent of our work, suggesting that FFI attenuates employees' resistance to feedback. For example, an application of FFI at Brembo (an Italian manufacturer of high quality automotive braking systems) indicated that after FFI, the 360-degree feedback reviews conducted by external consultants, and aimed at increasing middle managers' effectiveness, were characterized by higher levels of managers' openness than reviews without FFI (Chinotti and Signori, October 2008). Similarly, senior level managers in the Alberta (Canada) government spoke enthusiastically of the merits of using the FFI to conduct performance appraisals (of which they were highly critical). They reported that FFI had transformed the process into a meaningful experience for both themselves and their employees (Latham, G. P., February 1 2009). Nevertheless, it is important to further examine and validate the effect of feedforward before feedback (performance appraisal) with a quantitative approach. Moreover, it could be worthwhile to develop performance measures for assessing the effects of FFI that are conducted before or instead of performance appraisals.

2.1.2.3. Applied Research: Customer satisfaction. As for using FFI in place of customer surveys, an interesting outcome variable to examine may be the willingness of the respondent to purchase the products of the company that is asking for the feedback. Research has shown that asking for customer feedback (e.g., by a card placed in a hotel room) can reduce willingness to return to the same provider (Ofir & Simonson, 2001). Therefore, to examine the effectiveness of FFI, a comparative study could examine the effect of using FFI and administering feedback surveys on customers' purchase intentions and actual purchases.

2.1.2.4. Theoretical research. The hypotheses presented above both with regards to the modification of the protocol (e.g., adding active listening) and with regards to the outcomes (e.g., creation of new knowledge) could be tested in experiments. For example, one could compare the effect of FFI with active listening and the effect of administering FFI without active listening and test whether this manipulation affects the feeling of the interviewee of being understood. Similarly, outcome variables such as new knowledge could be tested similar to the paradigm used by Rechter (2009, See the *Positive Emotions* section above).

2.1.3. Types of dependent variables

The hypothesized outcomes of FFI basically entail two types of organizational benefits: uncovering unique information (cognitive), and creating a positive atmosphere (affective). In fact, Rechter (2009) has shown in an experiment that people interviewed with FFI report significantly more positive emotions and a significantly higher perception of learning than people interviewed with a neutral interview. Therefore, when designing an evaluation of FFI it is important to pay attention to both types of outcomes. In assessing FFI in organizations, attention should be paid both to focal performance measures (e.g., productivity, sales) and to contextual performance measures (e.g., helping co-workers, adhering to organizational norms), which were shown to be different facets of performance (Sackett & Lievens, 2008). This is so because FFI effects on revealing new information are likely to affect focal performance, whereas FFI effects on affect are more likely to influence contextual performance.

2.1.4. Constituency

Perhaps the more interesting implication of the hypotheses above is that in comparing FFI to a neutral interview, there will be a marked difference in all outcome variables among interviewers. That is, our theoretical model suggests, and the case studies that we reported demonstrate that interviewers using FFI, compared to interviewers using a neutral interview, will feel better, will experience more bonding with the interviewee, will learn more about the conditions needed to generate superior performance, and will experience being more supportive of the interviewee. Thus, this observation suggests that FFI effects could be sought at multiple levels: among interviewees, among interviewers, in the dyad of both interviewer and interviewee, and in the group or organization in which the dyads take part.

To appreciate the importance of considering multiple constituencies consider the following example. A few students of one of the authors discovered, via FFI, that they were in the wrong place (i.e., MBA program) and chose to quit. Is this outcome a success? From the point of view of a dean concerned with retention rates, the answer might be different from the point of view of a student who feels relieved, happier and armed with a better sense of his or her life mission. We believe that in the long run, given our focus on win-win stories, FFI development is beneficial, on balance, for all constituencies.

2.1.5. FFI limitations

The research directions outlined above are confirmatory in nature. Confirmatory research, which seeks to demonstrate the feasibility of an idea, is a desirable approach when the idea is in its infancy; however, seeking boundaries and falsification is appropriate when the idea has received acceptance and support (Eysenck, 1997; Kluger & Tikochinsky, 2001). As we gain experience with FFI, we have noted that the most serious limitation of FFI is in the large individual differences in ability to gain immediate benefits from a single interview. While we have observed that most interviewees become fully engaged in the interview and thoroughly enjoy the process, some interviewees may express some initial opposition followed by enthusiastic endorsement after several sessions, whereas a minority of interviewees never come to like it. In addition, interviewees may not resist the FFI as a whole, but might specifically find it hard to identify and discuss the emotions they felt at their peak experience, or might avoid focusing entirely on the outcome of their success. For example, in another FFI application at Brembo (an Italian manufacturer of high quality automotive braking systems) that was conducted to enhance engagement and self-awareness in a career development workshop, technical professionals (working in engineering and manufacturing areas) found it difficult to precisely identify and name emotions. Furthermore, they found it difficult to explore positive situations without considering performance outputs (Chinotti and Signori, October 2008).

The different observations presented above suggest several conclusions. First, to be able to evaluate FFI experientially, it is important to conduct several interviews in order to grasp the potential variability in FFI effectiveness. Second, a small minority of people tend to resist participation in FFI either as interviewers or interviewees. On the basis of the putative processes involved in FFI, one can generate hypotheses about individual differences (Eysenck, 1997), which may limit the effectiveness of FFI. For example, Rechter (2009) hypothesized that reactions to FFI will be moderated by attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). He found that individuals characterized by avoidant attachment style reported the most positive affect when they were not interviewed, in comparison to being interviewed either with FFI or with a neutral interview. Thus, FFI, like many other interactions in organizations, may appear too invasive for some individuals. Another variable that may limit FFI effectiveness is depression, because depressed people experience difficulties in recalling positive episodic memory (Kleim & Ehlers, 2008), the type of memory that is targeted by FFI. Similarly, people with high levels of psychodynamic denial (Westen, 1998) may experience initial resistance to FFI (e.g., difficulty in telling a specific story and insisting on describing abstract stories, inability to recall positive events or inability to choose a story because “everything is so good”). Therefore, FFI, like other interactions in organizations, could be an aversive experience for a minority of employees.

Given that in some cases using FFI may be met with resistance, we suggest two remedies at the applied level. First, rather than forcing across-the-board implementation of FFI, it could be used at the discretion of both the interviewer and interviewee, so as not to create a tyranny of positive psychology (Fineman, 2006). Second, some interviewees resist the positive questioning because they have an unheard grievance and find it difficult to focus on the positive when a concrete negative is so salient. Therefore, when the interviewee cannot recall a positive work experience one can modify the FFI to directly address the grievance. In such cases the interviewer can ask the following questions: “what upsets you now the most? Let's assume that the thing that upsets you is only the tip of an iceberg of a bigger issue. If so, the thing that upsets you is a symptom of what? What is the ideal opposite of this fundamental issue?” Armed with knowledge of the ideal situation that addresses the grievance, the interviewer can modify the introduction and question 1. For example, if an employee complains that his ideas are not taken seriously, he may discover that this is a symptom of a deeper experience of not being trusted or appreciated. The ideal opposite may be feeling trusted and appreciated. Thus the FFI can start with “Based on our conversation, I know that you had times in which you felt your were neither trusted nor appreciated, but perhaps there were times either here or elsewhere where you did feel trusted and appreciated. Today I want us to focus on such events”. After this lead-in (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003), the first FFI question could be “Could you please tell me a story about a case or situation in which you were not trusted or appreciated initially, but you did something to build trust and appreciation and enjoyed the process?” In this way, FFI addresses the grievance while transforming the conversation into an empowering experience, which is able to elicit the interviewee's strengths. This proposed FFI modification, which is aimed at addressing resistance and grievances, is an example of the needed interplay between a confirmatory approach (trying FFI, in this case experientially) and identifying disconfirming data (resistance to FFI), followed by a modification of the method.

In sum we call for further research to be conducted on FFI so as to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its underlying mechanisms, and to validate its contributions and its effects on the interviewee, on the interviewer and on their relationship. Above, we presented several considerations that should be addressed in the process of testing the merits of FFI. Among these considerations are the different possible research approaches one can adopt, as well as the possible research methods, research goals, types of dependent variables, and constituencies one can examine.

3. Conclusion

This paper introduces the FFI, which is a highly versatile interview process that is aimed at increasing employee performance and improving collaboration between managers and subordinates. FFI draws on the Appreciative Inquiry interview and offers a means of integrating the AI perspective into ongoing dyadic interactions within the organization. We suggest that FFI has the potential to create new knowledge for managers and HR practitioners. This knowledge can prove unique and advantageous for appraisal purposes, selection and placement, understanding customers and focusing strategic thinking around what works best in the organization. In parallel to the knowledge gain, FFI appears to contribute to the well-being of most interviewees and interviewers, and to the improvement of the relationship between them. To validate and further develop FFI, both qualitative and

quantitative research is needed. To test FFI qualitatively, we suggest practitioners and researchers begin the process by interviewing several people so as to appreciate the variability in response to FFI. To test FFI quantitatively, research measures should be developed that are intimately linked to the mechanisms and outcomes predicted by AI and FFI. Such research could bridge the worlds of AI practitioners and that of mainstream HR practitioners and researchers by providing the latter with empirical evidence as to the benefits and effectiveness of AI and FFI practices, and by providing AI practitioners with an empirically based understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved in these practices. This knowledge in turn will enable the fine-tuning of how to work best with AI and FFI and will consequently support their further development.

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