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# AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



Looking Back, Moving Forward

Celebrating 25 Years of *AI Practitioner*

Edited by

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Image of Indra's Net courtesy of Jackie Stavros and ChatGPT

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# From Foundations to Flight

## SOAR's Journey from Appreciative Inquiry to the *AI Practitioner*

**This article provides the origin story of SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results). Originating from Appreciative Inquiry, SOAR started as a positive approach to strategic thinking, planning and leading. It has expanded into management and leadership development, fostering an appreciative mindset. SOAR's adaptability and impact are documented by many contributions in *AI Practitioner* across various sectors and communities.**

In a world that often emphasizes problem-solving and critical analysis, a transformative framework, SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results) has emerged as a profoundly positive approach for strategic thinking, planning, leading and conversations. SOAR was originally designed to be used in strategy and strategic planning at the team and organizational levels. Over time, SOAR has also been used in personal and leadership development, encompassing coaching, mentoring and evaluation activities for individuals. SOAR is rooted in a shift from a deficit-based to an appreciative-based mindset. This mindset has enabled individuals and teams in their organizations and communities to harness their inherent potential for positive change.

SOAR originates from Appreciative Inquiry (AI), with AI's core principles and the AI 5D cycle forming the foundation for SOAR's approach (Godwin & Stavros, 2021). The development of SOAR is well-documented in academic literature, notably with the seminal article published in the *AI Practitioner* (AIP) journal in 2003 (Stavros et al., 2003). This was further expanded in 2007 with an AIP issue dedicated to [SOARing to High and Engaging Performance: An Appreciative Approach to Strategy](#), featuring twelve articles by AI practitioners. Additionally, SOAR's adaptability and effectiveness across diverse sectors, from youth programs to professional workplace environments and communities, have been highlighted in two Feature Choice articles and 28 other contributions from AI practitioners.

This article delves into the origin and history of SOAR, its generative nature and the significant impact of AI on its development and flexible application, as detailed in the *AI Practitioner* over the last 20 years.<sup>1</sup>

### The operating system of SOAR: Appreciative Inquiry



The initial inspiration for AI came when David Cooperrider began questioning the traditional problem-solving approach with his professors Suresh Srivastva and Ron Fry during his doctoral studies. Traditionally, organizations had focused on identifying problems and deficiencies within their systems and then implementing corrective measures. This deficit-based approach often created a culture of blame and negativity, at times hindering the growth and potential of individuals and teams in their organizations. David believed there had to be a better way to drive change and innovation in organizational life.

While conducting his research at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, David had a pivotal conversation with a senior leader around the clinic's successful aspects, rather than dwelling on its problems. Subsequent conversations with his advisors and those involved in his research at the Clinic inspired David's dissertation, *Appreciative Inquiry: Toward a Methodology for Understanding and Enhancing Organizational Innovation*. The heart of this dissertation begins with defining Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a "mode of action-research that meets the criteria of science as spelled out in generative-theoretical terms" (Cooperrider, 1985, p. 5).<sup>2</sup>

*This research sparked the idea that organizations could be transformed by amplifying and building upon their strengths.*

In 1995, having read David's dissertation and seminal article, what caught my attention was that instead of dwelling on the clinic's problems, an inquiry was launched, passionately discussing the successful aspects of the clinic. This research sparked the idea that organizations could be transformed by amplifying and building upon their strengths, rather than obsessing over their weaknesses. I was introduced to AI as a qualitative research technique – action research – a way of asking questions to discover what is best (strengths) and what is possible (opportunities). At this time, there was a set of AI principles, but no AI 4D cycle. The AI 4D cycle (which is now frequently known as the AI 5D cycle) emerged in 1998 as a structured approach to guiding people through an organizational transformation of Discovery, Dream, Design and Deliver.

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Anne Radford, who founded and published the *AI Practitioner* until 2015, evolving it from the *AI Newsletter* started in 1998. The journal has provided a vital platform for chronicling the development and contributions by others to SOAR.

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about the origins of AI based on David's dissertation, I recommend you read David's book on *Prospective Theory* (2021).

# SOAR

SOAR builds on AI by providing an approach for organizations to identify and strategize based on their strengths (S), exploration of opportunities (O), articulation of aspirations (A) and definition of measurable and meaningful results (R). It translates the original, philosophical approach of AI into a strategic framework that can be directly applied to those in organizations doing strategy and planning.

Let's first review how SOAR emerged because of its connection with both the AI principles and 5D cycle.

## SOAR's connection to Appreciative Inquiry: A natural evolution

While AI was gaining traction beyond action research as one of the most effective and widely used approaches for positive change, the SOAR framework was also emerging, closely related to AI in spirit and ideology.

*The dissertation explored and found how organizations can enhance their capabilities and resources.*

I had the opportunity to study and work with many of the AI thought-leaders while working on my doctorate in management at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio; David Cooperrider and Paul Salipante were my doctoral advisors. My dissertation, entitled *Capacity Building: An Appreciative Approach: A Relational Process of Building Your Organization's Future* (1998) focused on the concept of capacity building within organizations and how it could be approached from an appreciative perspective. The dissertation explored and found how organizations can enhance their capabilities and resources – noted as **strengths** to seek out **opportunities** to best achieve their **aspirations**, both internal (employees and board) and external (customers/clients, funders, and community) to the organization and build a positive and sustainable future with meaningful **results**. In this capacity-building framework, four other findings were identified:

1. Appreciative Inquiry facilitates capacity-building by being visionary and mission-focused, identifying best practices, search for life-giving forces and transforming organizations.
2. Capacity-building is relational, in that there needs to be a dialogue based on trust, collaboration and shared aspirations.
3. Capacity-building is participatory: people come together to actively learn, collaborate and grow themselves and their organization.
4. Capacity-building is non-hierarchical and multi-level, from the individual to the organization, to global possibilities.

My dissertation was a qualitative study guided by AI methodology that explored and emphasized the importance of recognizing and leveraging an organization's existing strengths to foster growth and development. Work with the Global Excellence in Management (GEM)<sup>3</sup> program taught me about capacity-building – the key finding is that an organization's driving force is its people. In these organizations, we learned that people want both meaning and a sense of achievement in their work. They want to be part of building the organization's capacity to learn, grow and serve. This capacity-building framework aligns with AI principles.

### SOAR connections to AI principles

*SOAR guides a collaborative, generative dialogue on possibilities and desired future of a team or organization leveraging the AI principles.*

SOAR guides a collaborative, generative dialogue on possibilities and desired future of a team or organization leveraging the AI principles:

**Constructionist principle:** Our reality is constructed through language and conversations. This principle suggests that dialogue about strengths, opportunities, aspirations and successes can lead to a more constructive and positive outcomes (results).

**Simultaneity principle:** Change begins the moment we ask a question. The types of questions we ask about strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results or weakness, threats, mistakes and consequences influence the outcomes we get and lead us in one direction or another.

**Anticipatory principle:** What we focus on becomes our reality. People in organizations move in the direction of the images they hold about their future, highlighting the importance of possibilities (opportunities) and aspirational visions.

**Poetic principle:** Organizations can be seen as an open book, where stories can be continuously reinterpreted and rewritten. This principle supports the idea that there is always something working (strengths) or possibilities (opportunities) to build on.

<sup>3</sup> The Global Excellence in Management (GEM) program was a collaborative initiative between the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and Case Western Reserve University Weatherhead School of Management to support capacity building in developing and transitional economies. It engaged diverse participants from international governmental organizations, NGOs from south and north countries, educational institutions, and leaders from various sectors. The program focused on enhancing the quality of management education, developing effective leadership and fostering sustainable economic and social development through strategic partnerships and knowledge exchange.

*SOAR emerged as a natural evolution of the AI foundational principles.*

*When the AI 5D cycle emerged, it offered a structured approach to using SOAR.*

**Positive principle:** Positive images (like soaring) and positive approaches (like SOAR) can lead to positive change. This principle underlines the importance of focusing on strengths and positive potentials.

SOAR emerged as a natural evolution of the AI foundational principles, taking a more strategic-focused approach to organization development and change. It can be used by simply asking SOAR-based questions (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2021, p. 6):

**Strengths:** What are we best at?

**Opportunities:** What are the possibilities?

**Aspirations:** What are our dreams?

**Results:** What are meaningful outcomes?

Or SOAR can be used with the AI 5D Cycle to guide conversations in strategy or strategic planning with others – whole systems engagement.

### SOAR and the AI 5D cycle

When the AI 5D cycle emerged, it offered a structured approach to using SOAR to guide a strategic conversation focused on strengths, opportunities, aspiration and results. Here is how the 5D cycle further influenced the development of SOAR:<sup>4</sup>

**Define:** Clarify the focus of the strategic inquiry. Decide on why, how, when and where you want to use SOAR to gain a whole system perspective. How much time will be dedicated? Who will you invite? What do you want to have everyone experience. What data are you looking for from the conversations?

**Discover:** The process begins with discovering the organization's strengths and the positive aspects of its culture. This phase encourages stakeholders to engage in open and reflective strategic conversations that uncover what is working well.

**Dream:** Building upon the insights gained in the Discover phase, the Dream phase encourages individuals and groups to imagine opportunities and ideal futures for the organization. This envisions what could be, setting the stage for a shared vision and aspirations.

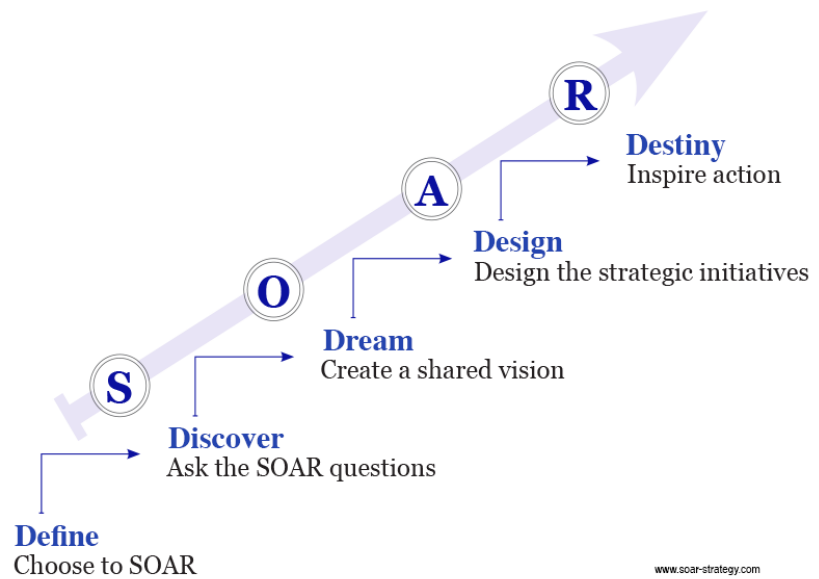
**Design:** In the Design phase, participants collaborate to design strategic initiatives and strategies based on strengths and opportunities identified that

<sup>4</sup> There have been many illustrations of SOAR and the AI 5D/5I cycles; you can see the design evolution in the "SOAR 2020 and Beyond: Strategy, Systems, Innovation, and Stakeholder Engagement" in *AI Practitioner*.

align with the envisioned future – aspirations. This phase promotes creativity and innovation, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and ways to move forward.

**Destiny:** The final phase, Destiny, involves the discussion of results and action plans that support strategic initiatives. It requires continuous monitoring and feedback loops to ensure that the desired changes become part of the organization’s strategic implementation and culture.

SOAR links with the 5D AI cycle



This synergy between SOAR to AI principles and the related 5D cycle fosters a positive culture, whole system engagement and facilitates strategic change at any level. This further demonstrates how the application of strengths-based approaches can lead to innovation, engagement and success in organizational settings (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2021). An important part of the “how” is to point out that you need to be inclusive beyond senior managers in inviting those into the strategic conversations, including those employees who are closest to your customers, suppliers, processes and communities served.

Why? By including a broad spectrum of voices in the SOAR conversation, it ensures a comprehensive understanding of the strengths, opportunities, aspirations and potential results, leading to more effective and inclusive strategic planning and decision-making.

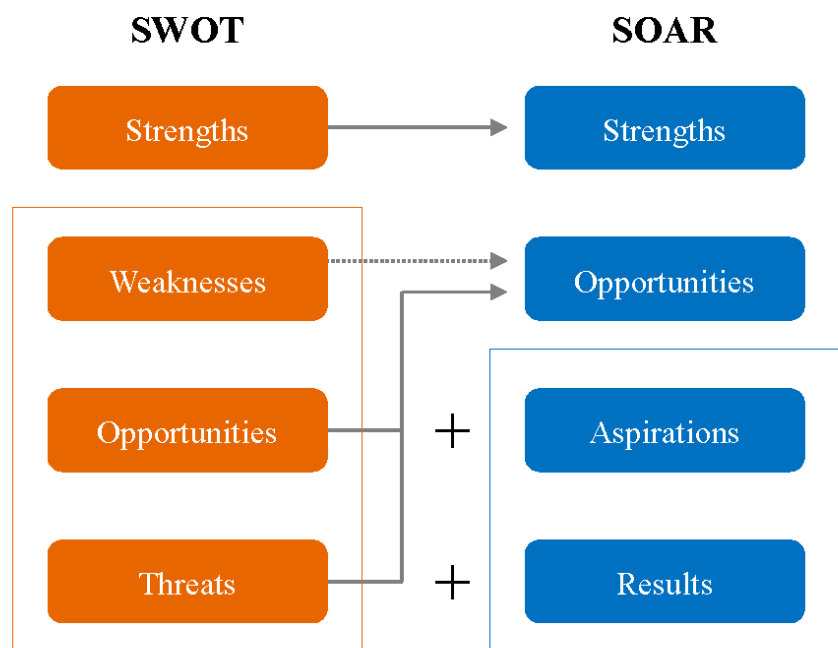
### SOAR takes flight: From SWOT to SOAR

Prior to learning about AI at Case Western, my work was in strategic marketing, branding and international business development. Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I used the analytical SWOT approach (Strengths, Weaknesses,

Opportunities and Threats) to do strategic assessment and planning. It helps organizations understand internal resources and capabilities (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) that could impact their objectives. SWOT is a diagnostic strategy tool developed in the 1950s. It highlights positive and negatives and mitigates risks of competition. Often times we got stuck in our strategic thinking and planning based on the weaknesses and threats identified.

The initial development of SOAR from SWOT emerged as a response to the

Moving from SWOT to SOAR



desire for a more positive and strengths-based approach to strategic planning. While SWOT analysis provides a balanced view of internal and external factors, including negative aspects like weaknesses and threats, it sometimes led to a defensive mindset focused on fixing problems or reacting to threats.

*SOAR does not ignore weaknesses and threats: instead it invites you to reframe a weakness or threat.*

On the other hand, SOAR invites a strategic dialogue on discovering and building on strengths, envisioning opportunities and aspirations, and defining results. SOAR does not ignore weaknesses and threats: instead it invites you to reframe a weakness or to strategically think about a threat as a possible opportunity.

SWOT is diagnostic; SOAR is dialogical. This shift inspires conversations on innovation and growth rather than limitations and risks. The focus is on potential and positive outcomes.

This experience, and my research, inspired and informed the capacity-building framework in my dissertation, which became the genesis for the creation of

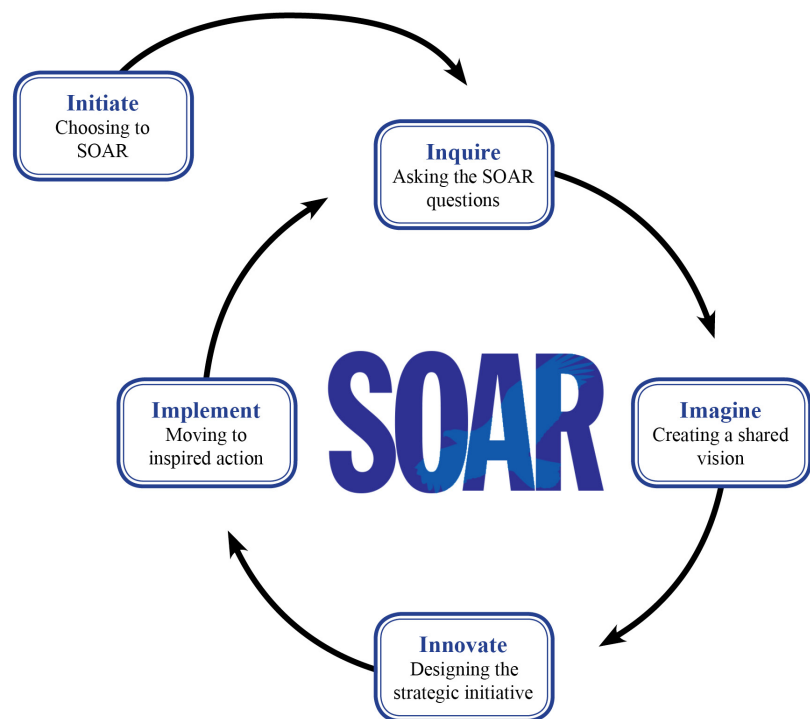
a SOAR framework for appreciative-based strategy, strategic thinking and planning. SOAR has been transformed over the last 25 years based on the work of many in the AI community, some of which are chronicled in AIP. It is used all over the world and at multiple levels in organizations: one-to-one mentoring/coaching, within teams, departments, divisions, in organizations and industries in a variety of ways that also include strategic leading, conversations and personal development plans.<sup>5</sup>

### SOAR framework at the organizational level

Although SOAR can be used in many ways, it will be explained from the organizational level, where it is used most often.<sup>6</sup> There have also been many illustrations of SOAR with and without the AI 5D cycle (and some that use the AI 5I cycle).<sup>7</sup>

**Strengths:** This component focuses on identifying and leveraging an organization's existing strengths, which are its capabilities and assets. It

The 5I cycle: An alternative to the 5D cycle



<sup>5</sup> To learn more about SOAR's origin, see the May 2020 AIP article on "[SOAR 2020 and Beyond](#)".

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.soar-strategy.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Some prefer to use the 5Ds and others the 5I language, they mean the same Define (Initiate), Discover (Inquire), Dream (Imagine), Design (Innovate) and Destiny/Deliver (Implement) – your choice.

encourages an honest assessment of what the organization does well and what sets it apart from others.

**Opportunities:** SOAR places a strong emphasis on identifying and capitalizing on opportunities in the external environment. This involves recognizing emerging trends, market shifts, innovations and areas – possibilities – where the organization can thrive.

**Aspirations:** Similar to AI’s dream phase, the aspirations component of SOAR encourages organizations to envision their ideal future. This phase helps define the organization’s purpose – why it exists – and long-term objectives so it can decide on what strategic initiatives to invest in.

**Results:** The final component, results, leverages strengths and translates opportunities and aspirations into strategic initiatives with concrete actions and measurable outcomes. It involves creating a roadmap for achieving the organization’s goals and monitoring progress along the way.

Appreciative Inquiry serves as the operating system for SOAR by providing the foundational principles and 5D cycle that guide its approach to strategic planning and development. This ensures that SOAR is not just a tool for planning, but a holistic approach to organization, leadership and management development that embodies an appreciative and inquiry-based approach and mindset.

*Appreciative Inquiry serves as the operating system for SOAR by providing the foundational principles and 5D cycle.*

SOAR has been used by many organizations across various sectors, including business, education, healthcare and government. Their application has led to remarkable transformations, emphasizing positive change, collaboration and the empowerment of individuals and teams. And you can read about many of these applications in the *AI Practitioner*.

For SOAR, Appreciative Inquiry and the *AI Practitioner* were natural evolutions!

### SOAR: Its seminal article and beyond: *AI Practitioner*

As mentioned earlier, SOAR<sup>8</sup> made its debut in 2003 in *AI Practitioner: The International Newsletter of AI Best Practices* in the *Appreciative Strategy* issue with the first article, “The Heart of Appreciative Strategy”, by John Sutherland and me, and the second article, “Strategic Inquiry and Appreciative Intent: Inspiration to SOAR: A New Framework for Strategic Planning” written by David Cooperrider, Lynn Kelley and me.

<sup>8</sup> You can download this issue for free at <https://aipractitioner.com/product/ai-practitioner-august-2007/>

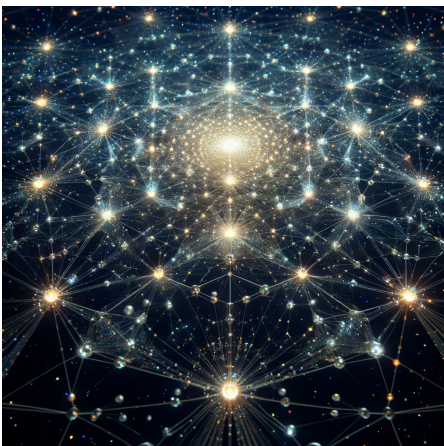
*SOAR offers a perspective centered on strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results.*

In 2007, when the newsletter had become the *AI Practitioner: The International Journal of AI Best Practices*, there was an entire issue devoted to SOAR based on its solid grounding and practices throughout the AI world. That special issue, *SOARing to High and Engaging Performance: An Appreciative Approach to Strategy*, provided an update to the SOAR framework and twelve case studies from those in our AI communities demonstrating its application and positive impact.

### Summary: SOAR and Appreciative Inquiry: A synergy of strengths

In a world that can easily fixate on weaknesses, threats and deficits, SOAR offers a perspective centered on strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results. This approach empowers individuals in teams, organizations and communities to unleash their true potential and envision a hopeful future. SOAR leverages the power of Appreciative Inquiry to drive strategic thinking, planning and leading that improves individual performance and team dynamics, and fosters a culture of continuous improvement and growth.

A review of SOAR's history and contributions is a testament to the enduring power of Appreciative Inquiry to fuel productive and meaningful engagement (Stavros & Torres, 2022). From humble beginnings, SOAR has offered and continues to offer a way to co-create strategic possibilities at any level in any industry, community and eco-system. May it continue to flourish and inspire many more to SOAR!



This image of Indra's Net was created using AI technology and is based on the conceptual description provided by Jackie Stavros of how AI and SOAR align with the Indra's Net.

In the seminal book, *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook for Leaders of Change*, on the front cover is a picture of the Indra's Net because:

*The Jewel Net of Indra is like an infinite set of glittering points of light. In Indra's Net, as in the Appreciative Inquiry process, the myriad reflections within each glittering jewel are the essence of the jewel (organization) itself, without which it does not exist. In direct relation to the AI process - particularly in the Discovery phase - every jewel is a Center of the Universe, necessary to the completed enterprise. The Net is an ancient image of oneness and diversity. Indra's Net is a web of relationships that sparkle, nourish, and amplify ... as does the Appreciative Inquiry approach to embracing and leading organizational change.*

Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008, p. xiv

Indra's Net, as it relates to Appreciative Inquiry, emphasizes the essential interconnectedness of every individual, where each person's contributions reflect and amplify others', akin to a vast network enhancing the whole.

This extends into the context of SOAR where AI is the operating system that underscores the vital interplay and mutual enhancement of strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results, thereby magnifying the collective strategic capacity for positive change and success in our organizations, communities and industries.

*Special Note:* My heartfelt thanks to the AI community and *AI Practitioner* for being the nurturing ground for SOAR. Your commitment to exploring and sharing how you have applied SOAR has been, and continues to be, invaluable. Your thoughtful, inclusive and creative ways of sharing your work have helped others also soar! Thank you also to *AI Practitioner* for seeing and supporting this way of harnessing generative inquiry. From the debut article to those that have followed, it has helped highlight the many ways of combining the power of AI with the flexibility of the SOAR framework.

## Appendix A

Since 2007, SOAR has made another 25 appearances in AIP in articles written by a number of contributors, from a brief mention to others detailing its application and outcomes in particular situations. (Articles and issues that can be downloaded for free from the *AI Practitioner* website are highlighted with a blue hyperlink.)

Date	Issue/Article	Author(s)
August 2008	The CMS connection between Green Supply Chain and Sustainability	Joseph R. Sprangel Jr.
	U.S. Army Business Transformation Journey to Discovering Sustainability	Jackie Stavros, Sheryl L. Mitchell and Major Loyd Beal, III
November 2008	Introduction to <i>Strength-Based Organizations: The Challenge for Appreciative Inquiry 2.0</i>	Bernard J Mohr, Catherine McKenna, Sallie Lee and Joanne Daykin
February 2009	Learning from the Military: Developing an AI-based Project Debrief Toolkit	Tim Slack
November 2009	Mathivation: The Inspiring Way Back to Joy and Engagement	Johan Svensson
August 2010	SOARing for Sustainability: Longitudinal Organizational Efforts Applying Appreciative Inquiry	Gina Hinrichs
February 2011	Positive and Appreciative Leadership	Sarah Lewis and Lesley Moore
February 2012	Virtual SOARing in a School of Nursing: Creating Space for Emergent Design	Kristen Crusoe
August 2013	<a href="#">The Generative Nature of SOAR: Applications, Results and the New SOAR Profile</a>	Jackie Stavros
February 2014	Positive Adaptive Leadership and Key Principles of Practice in a Time of Uncertainty	Sarah Lewis

Date	Issue/Article	Author(s)
May 2014	Appreciative Inquiry Helps a New College Leader Create a Team Environment – Fast!	Sandra Davidson
	Creating and Sustaining an Appreciative Culture in a Community College from 2006 to 2014	Jayne Peaslee
August 2014	<a href="#">Appreciative Inquiry Research Review &amp; Notes: SOAR</a>	Jackie Stavros, Matthew L. Cole and Jennifer Hitchcock
May 2015	Appreciative Intergenerational Conversations	Alexandra Stavros
August 2015	Partnerships that Matter – Results that Count: Colleges and Consultants Lifting Up Higher Education in Canada	Sharon Carry, Denise Henning, Jeanie Cockell and Joan McArthur-Blair
November 2015	Lean with a Solution-focused Twist: A Process of Continuous Improvement	Karla Stonham and Brenda Zalter-Minden
May 2018	Lawrence Technological University ‘Leaders in the Making’: An Effective Leader is a Learning Leader	Matthew L. Cole, Jackie Stavros and Menuka Herath
February 2020	Designing a Breakthrough Business Strategy to Co-Create the Future by Leveraging Teams’ Strengths and Harnessing Collaborative Capacity	Ankur Dhanuka and Vivek Sharma
May 2020	<a href="#">SOAR 2020 and Beyond: Strategy, Systems and Stakeholder Engagement</a>	Jackie Stavros
February 2021	<a href="#">Appreciative Inquiry: A Life-Giving Personal Operating System</a>	Lindsey Godwin and Jackie Stavros
August/September 2021	Epilogue: Experiences in Ibero-America	Miriam Subirana
November 2021	The Meaning of Embracing the Sun: The Appreciative Inquiry Process in a Participatory Diagnosis at Casas Hogar Guadalajara in Mexico	Circe Peralta
	Digital Appreciative Inquiry: A Whole New Relational Experience	Bernard Tollec
February 2022	From Guyana to Wisconsin: Seeding Positive Institutions Through Inclusive Leadership	Jennie Hetzel Silbert
May 2022	Reflections on the Open Space on Spirituality and Appreciative Inquiry	Fiona Thomas
August/September 2022	Pause-Reboot-SOAR: Supporting Champlain College Students During the Pandemic	Lauren Bruneau

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