

# **Paper Management Consulting**

**Faculty of Business and Economics  
Groningen**

**“What are the key success factors for appreciative inquiry?”**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this article are the key success factors for appreciative inquiry. To find the factors for the conceptual model, some success factors for large scale interventions were investigated. After this, their influence on the success of appreciative inquiry was studied. These factors include management commitment, consultant as facilitator, and management willingness to share power. These three factors were confirmed as key success factors and, besides these, assurance of appreciative inquiry after the program was also found as key success factor.

**Keywords:** Appreciative inquiry, Large Scale Interventions, Success Factors, Management Consultancy

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## INTRODUCTION

In these times, many companies are changing rapidly to keep up or outwit the competition. Large Scale Interventions (LSI) are inevitable in times of globalization, mergers and highly evolving markets. The success of many LSI depends on many different content and contextual factors. Some well known issues or factors that influence success are management commitment, consultant as facilitator and the willingness of management to share power (Van der Zouwen, 2011). Additionally, change projects often contain many political games due to different interests, meanings and feelings of stakeholders, which make it difficult to implement the change. These differences are often more widespread in Large Scale Interventions (LSI) in the sense that many managers and employees are involved.

No longer are employees treated as mechanistic artifacts who will do whatever their superior wants. They are treated as human beings with their own will, norms, values, thoughts and feelings which can be useful. More and more employees are seen as a unique competitive advantage for a company. In order to deal with these differences, especially in LSI where many stakeholders are involved, it seems that emotional competence and skills of employees and particularly management consultants are becoming highly important.

The way management consultants deal with these difficulties is dependent on the kind of approach. One approach, which is still often used by many management consultants, is called traditional Organizational Development (OD) (Burnes, 2009). This approach in change projects can be characterized as a planned effort which is often organization wide and includes a top-down management style. Therefore, OD can be labeled as a problem solving approach where the change consultant diagnoses the organizational problems/weaknesses and prescribes a solution. In contrast, Appreciative Inquiry (A.I.) is an approach which is based on developing the strengths and core competences of the organization rather than its weaknesses or problems (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Therefore, it could be stated that A.I. is looking for opportunities rather than problems.

There is a lot of literature which provides a wealth of information on the A.I. approach and it is often described as a very good, effective way of implementing change (Johnson & Leavit, 2001; Srithika & Bhattacharyya, 2009; Fitzgerald, Murrell & Miller, 2003; etcetera). However, most change management approaches used in LSI these days are of the traditional problem thinking/solving kind. It is interesting that A.I. is not applied more often during LSI. It could be that some success factors prescribed for LSI are not valid for A.I. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on the relation between three important success factors of LSI (Van der Zouwen, 2011) towards the success of A.I. during LSI. The research question for this paper is:

*“What are the key success factors of Appreciative Inquiry?”*

Firstly a theoretical section is provided on A.I and LSI which will clarify the conceptual model. Secondly, the method in which data was gathered and the way these are measured are described in the methodological section. Thirdly, the results of the interviews with management consultants are presented in the result section. Conclusions which can be drawn from this research are described in the conclusion section. Finally the limitations of this research and suggestions for future research are given in the discussion.

## **THEORY**

In this section a theoretical description of both A.I. and LSI will be provided, after this the variables, and their relationships, are explained. Finally a conceptual model will be presented.

### **What is Appreciative Inquiry?**

“A.I. engages the whole organization in discovering the best of what has been and dreaming about the best what might be” (Whitney & Schau, 1998, p.11). The A.I. change approach starts from the point that every organization has aspects that work well and this can be the kick-off for change (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2005).

This idea is based on five principles for appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). The first is “the constructionist principle”, this means that realities are socially constructed and that our knowledge and actions are interwoven. The second is “the principle of simultaneity”, this means that the change already starts when the inquiry starts. This is in contradiction with traditional action research model, because there the inquiry is separate from the change implementation (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). The metaphor that an organization is like an open book, in which story telling is important, applies to the third principle “the poetic principle”. This means that the language used has an important implication on the outcome(s) of the inquiry (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider et al, 2005). These three principles can be labeled to the school of social constructionism, which states that persons create their own realities and have an influence on the experience of these realities and how they perceive them (Fitzgerald et al., 2003).

The last two principles can be labeled as the theory of positive expectancy. This means that the positive future realities/images direct our actions. So the positive image of people leads to positive activities of those people (Fitzgerald et al., 2003). The fourth principle is "the anticipatory principle", it says that the actions we do today are guided by our reality/image of the future (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). The last principle is "the positive principle", Bushe & Kassam (2005) states that "momentum and sustainable change requires positive affect and social bonding". So the more positive the people think about the future reality the more positive and open they are towards change, which increases the successfulness of the change effort (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Fitzgerald et al., 2003).

For the process of positive change a 4-D cycle is created, based on the assumption that change starts by an inquiry and dialogue, the four phases are (Whitney & Schau, 1998; Cooperrider and Whitney, 1998; Bushe, 2005; Fitzgerald et al., 2003):

- **Discovery:** The inquiry starts with identifying positive stories and circulates them through the organization. The focus shifts from what is not working to what works and the future perspective. Additionally, in this phase the selection of the topics takes place.

- Dream: In this phase people and groups are triggered to think out of the box. Participants are triggered to think about the future of the organization and to link the work of all employees to a greater goal (Whitney & Schau, 1998).
- Design: In this phase the creation of the organization begins, because in A.I. large involvement is essential it can be said that all stakeholders co-create the organization and the future (Cooperrider et al., 2005).
- Delivery: In this phase the focus is on action planning and implementing on the organization and personal level (Whitney & Schau, 1998).

### **Large Scale Intervention**

LSI is a participative approach for organizational wide intervention, involving the whole system in the change process and changing the entire organization. Van der Zouwen (2011) mentions that in the literature there are many different definitions for LSI, such as large scale change, whole systems change and whole system working. All these definitions see the organization as a whole system and are aimed at an enduring intervention/change in the characteristics of an organization.

Mohrman et al. (1989) comes up with three main dimensions for this type of change; (1) it is deep rather than superficial change, (2) it occurs in large, complex organizations that involve "a lot of people performing many different roles," and (3) it pervades organizational life (the more subunits, subsystems, and levels affected, the greater the change). Manning & Binzagr (1996) come up with six common values and assumptions underlying large scale change interventions; (1) organizations are seen as "whole systems" (2) viewing organizations as whole systems requires the creation of dialogue among all organizational stakeholders, (3) organizations do not exist, but organizing processes and procedures do, (4) what we perceive as our collective organizational reality becomes the organization that is created, (5) individuals within organizations have the capacity to self-organize and redefine their reality, and (6) humanity shares a set of universal values that are inherently "good" and these values will ultimately influence voluntary collective action.

## **The Independent and Dependent Variables**

**Success.** In this article the definition which is used for success is a combination of the authors' own interpretation and a definition derived from the literature. Success of a change process is determined by reaching the predetermined goals, objectives, or the results of a process (Oakland & Tanner, 2007).

**Facilitating consultant.** In this turbulent and rapidly changing environment organizations need to change more and more. Therefore, organizations increasingly use consultants for their expertise and for their knowledge about a change processes. An external consultant can have value for the organization in many ways. One example is to assist the change process or, for another example, to transfer knowledge (Oakland & Tanner, 2007). These two examples can be placed on the continuum, with roles for the consultant, created by Lippitt & Lippitt (1978). One end of the continuum is the process role, here the problem-solving is done by the client and the consultant supports the process of the change. At the other end is the resource role, here the problem-solving is done by the consultant (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1978).

In most of the traditional change approaches, the consultant is hired for their expertise and for their experience (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Unlike the role of the consultant in the traditional change approaches, the consultant during an A.I. process is above all on the process side of the continuum. This is because during an A.I. intervention the client organization analysis the problem and comes up with a solution to get to their dreamed future. The consultant guides the client organization during the process but the content of the process is created by the client organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

The consultant needs to act as a facilitator, so on the process side of the continuum, to increase the success of A.I. This is because the intervention needs to be bottom-up and the stories and dreams needs to be created by the client organization.

**Management commitment.** Van der Zouwen (2011) mentions "leaders are willing to

spend time and money to do it by the book” and “leaders are willing to collaborate” as success factors for large scale interventions. For this research this factor has been adapted to “management commitment” as success factor for A.I., because if the management is committed they are willing to spend resources on the project and collaborate.

Management commitment was an essential success factor within the case of British Airways for the A.I. process (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). They state that organizational leaders have to be positive change catalysts or sponsors. In an A.I. intervention the whole client organization, if possible, needs to participate in the change process which includes the management. In this way the management hears the stories and future dreams of the employees and the other way around. Additionally, when the management is committed to the A.I. intervention, they will provide the required resources for the project. Furthermore, when the management is committed they will participate during the process independent of the outcomes of the intervention (Masselink, Van den Nieuwenhof, De Jong & Van Iren, 2008). This can be difficult for managers, because the management has to loosen their control and see what the process will bring. To loosen their control on the process and outcome they have to trust the consultant and the employees, this part on control will be explained in the next section “willingness of management to share power”.

Concluding, a management which is committed, has an open mind, and has trust in the process which increases the successfulness of A.I. (Masselink et al., 2008).

**Willingness of management to share power.** One of the independent variables in the conceptual model is the willingness of management to share power. In the article of Van der Zouwen (2011) this is indicated as an important success factor. She indicates that in order to support large scale interventions, leaders need to be willing to collaborate and share power. Within A.I. this becomes even more prominent as opposed to the already high importance during other change approaches.

In his article on successful organization change, Greiner (1967) distinguishes between two forms of sharing power. The first form is the group decision making. Here the problems are still defined by the top, however the solution to the problem is put into the hands of a group at the lower level and they are free to create different solutions and choose among them. The idea behind this is that people are more committed when they have a voice in the decisions that affect them.

The second form is group problem solving, here both the problem and the solution are found within the context of group discussion. Power is essentially shared through these discussions and the assumption here is that people will become more committed when they are exposed to a higher degree of decision making and their specific knowledge will aid in the definition of the problems. For this study the focus will be mostly on the group problem solving as defined by Greiner (1967). However it is important to remember that it is aimed at A.I. and that defining the problem will not be part of the process. The difference between traditional problem solving and A.I. lies at the basis, (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) which shifts the focus entirely to possible future states, or solutions, which can be found in the first form of sharing power.

However the effect for management will still be to share (decision making) power with its (lower level) employees. A.I. changes the decision making process of organizations and this is a key determinant of the behavior of firms (Alonso & Matouschek, 2007). One important element of this change is the delegation of this power to employees and the problem is that due to their consistent biases they can be expected to make different decisions than the owners would (Jensen, 1986). Managers, on all hierarchical levels, need to be aware of this and willing to accept the fact that the findings of their subordinates may differ from their own expectations.

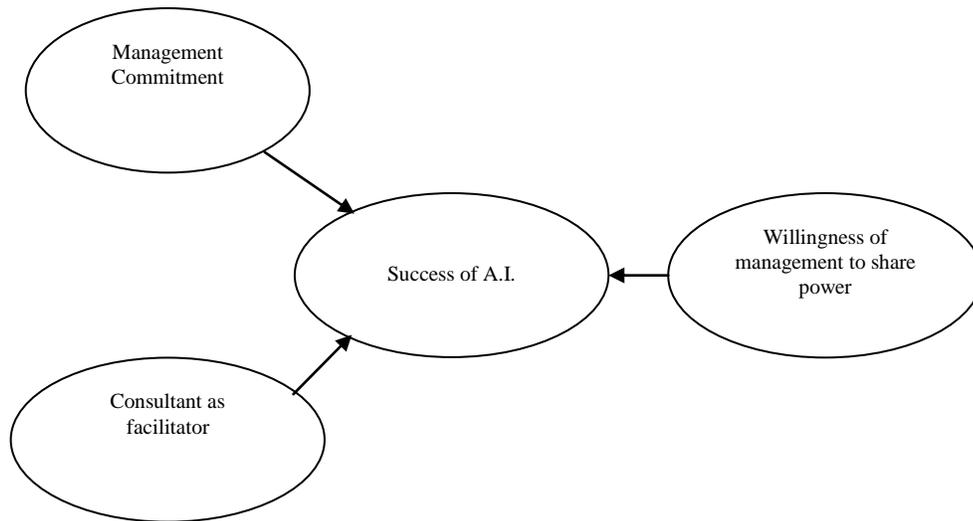
The fact that they must be willing to share power presents a major obstacle as much literature indicates the importance of power within organizations. Abraham Zaleznik (1971) illustrates this by stating: "Competition for power is a fact of life in business organizations, just as in any social structure that provides scope for the interplay of

personal motives and organizational objectives. Often this competition has a destructive effect on the lives of managers and the performance of the company; but if understood- and intelligently managed, it can contribute constructively to both.” (p.52)

Both Van der Zouwen and Greiner indicate the importance of the willingness to share power on the successfulness of (large scale) changes. The characteristics of the A.I. approach suggest that this is equally, if not even more, important during change processes.

**Conceptual Model.** The independent variables and their relation to the dependent variables are shown in the following conceptual model:

FIGURE 1



Relation between the success of A.I. and the key success factors.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study factors that influence the success of appreciative inquiry are investigated. To empirically test whether the factors found in the literature reflect the reality, semi-structured interviews with four consultants who use appreciative inquiry were conducted. The interviews took about one hour per consultant. The consultants were employed in different companies which increased the objectivity on the subjects. The interviews were mainly qualitative, but with a small ranking question about the factors that influence the success of A.I. By using qualitative data gathering the semi-structured interviews were used to create a guideline while also keeping the interviews flexible.

The interview can be divided into two parts; the first part consisted out of general questions about the consultant and A.I. The second part focused on the factors that influence the success of A.I. The results of the interviews were used to compare the outcomes found in the literature with the view of the practitioners. This study uses some factors that influence the success of LSI in order to see if these also influence the success of A.I.

## RESULTS

The results are based on gained information during interview sessions with four management consultants. Each management consultant is active in the field of A.I. and therefore eligible and appropriate for this research. When a topic is supported by all consultants it is referred to as all interviews and if they do not support a certain claim or differ in their opinion the specific consultant is mentioned.

### **Management Commitment**

The consultants mentioned that commitment is very important for the success of LSI, however also very difficult to shape or create. During the interviews Mrs. Jacobs and Mrs. Reijmers described commitment of management as a precondition for using the A.I. approach. A different approach should be applied when management consultants feel that managers are not fully committed towards the use of A.I. Additionally, Mrs. Jacobs and Mrs. Reijmers are not willing to start a LSI when management is not fully committed towards an A.I. approach.

Managers must always have some affinity with A.I. however Mr. Masselink mentioned that during the start of LSI with an A.I approach managers do not have to be fully committed. They can also be compliant. Full commitment can be shaped during a try-out session for a selective amount of managers. During this try-out, managers experience the four phases of A.I. approach and its advantages. After this try-out, managers need to be fully committed and therefore supportive towards the A.I. approach for LSI. If not, management consultants have to decide if they are willing to continue the A.I. approach with compliant managers instead of committed managers, or choose a different approach which could be more suitable.

Management commitment is important, because it creates much more support for LSI throughout the hierarchy. Management commitment results in greater motivation towards employees and this motivation results in greater involvement and engagement of employees. What is remarkable is the fact that each consultant preferred the greatest possible amount of involvement. However Mrs. Reijmers mentioned that involving every

employee and manager into the LSI is in practice not always feasible due to money, time and resource constraints.

Another aspect of gaining commitment is collaboration between the employees and managers which supports the co-creation aspect of A.I.. According to all interviewees openness and transparent communication during collaboration creates greater, positive involvement and therefore will result in more effective participation. Hereby transparency means communicating by forehand what the results of the discovery and dream phase will be, to prevent disappointment of involved employees during the design and destiny phase. Additionally, the interviewees mentioned that clarifying the responsibilities of every employee is an important element of transparency. This will result in less ambiguity and bureaucracy during a LSI using A.I.

The consultants mentioned that management commitment is also about trust between the management consultant and the managers involved. With lack of trust, managers will probably not accept the advice of the management consultants and therefore question the effectiveness of the A.I. approach for LSI. The same goes for trust between managers and their employees. When employees do not have faith in the decisions taken by the managers, the effectiveness of a chosen approach can be disappointing. Therefore, synergy between the involved employees, managers and management consultants are of major importance for the effectiveness of A.I. during LSI.

The consultants also mentioned that managers have to accept that employees will get a voice during the implementation phases of A.I. to gain synergy between the parties involved. Having a voice means having the opportunity and power to bring to light what is in the hearts and minds of employees. This additional power of employees can be seen as a dangerous and frightening phenomenon from the perspective of management.

### **Willingness of Management to Share Power**

Even when managers know that the authority they have will not change, they can still feel that their informal authority or power is changing. For instance, when employees are given a voice, the manager is not the only one who can diffuse ideas and create the path to success. During A.I. managers will have to share this power with managers which are higher in the hierarchy and also with employees lower in the hierarchy.

Especially because the A.I. approach is based on involvement and collaboration of many employees and managers, the acceptance that employees are also having a voice is important. The consultants mention that especially during the Dream phase, where all involved employees can “dream” about “what might be”, the bottom up power becomes apparent. The downside to involve as many employees as possible is that management can feel that their tasks and activities are taken over by employees with less authority. This can result in less support and commitment by management and harm the co-creation aspect of A.I., which could then result in negative consequences such as resistance to LSI. Therefore, the willingness to share power by management is a success factor of A.I. according to all the consultants.

During the interviews the consultants mention that managers need to feel that co-creation and giving a voice to employees can create better results. The growing democracy, by having a voice, within the different hierarchical levels of the organization will lead to greater involvement and self esteem of employees. This is due to the fact that they are heard and feel that they truly add some value to the organization. However, managers are still in charge and have to take responsibility for the decisions which are made during the design and destiny phase. Managers can gain a broader insight by using the ideas and innovative thoughts of their employees. Here, the management consultant is not an expert on the content, however more an expert on the process side of the LSI. Management consultants are therefore setting the stage and fulfilling a supportive, facilitating role during the LSI. This was stated by all consultants during the interviews.

### **Consultants as Facilitator**

As described in the theory section, a consultant using A.I. needs to take the role of facilitator during a change process. However is this also the case in practice?

During the interviews it was supported by all consultants that there are two roles a consultant can fulfill. The consultant as an expert and the role of facilitator. Support was found for the claim that a consultant using A.I. as an approach for LSI needs to take the role of a facilitator. The consultants confirmed the relation between the use of A.I. as a LSI and the facilitator role for the consultant during a change project. The reason that was mentioned for taking the role as a facilitator comes forth from the perspective that during an A.I. process the consultants is only helping/facilitating the process of change. The content has to be delivered by the client and the organization itself. It is very important that the consultants are only guiding and giving direction to the process. This doesn't mean that the role of the consultant is to watch from the sideline. It is very important that, as a consultant, you actively participate and are intensively involved. Having good listening skills is essential to fulfill this role. During the interview, Mr. Van t' Klooster mentioned that sometimes there is a thin line between staying in a facilitator role and stepping in the process to take on a role as an expert. However, it is essential that the stakeholders, design team and people involved stay responsible for the content of the program.

Besides the role of the consultant, several other factors were mentioned. One factor that was mentioned by Mr. Masselink was timing. It is very important to time the different phases of the 4-D cycle. Timing is essential during the process of an A.I. approach. Another very important factor is the correct use of language. Using metaphors, storytelling and the use of positive synonyms in the language as a consultant is a success factor according to Mrs. Jacobs. For example, do not use the expression "human resources" during communication because this will emphasize the idea that employees are replaceable objects. Employees must be seen as organisms which are not replaceable

and give the organization unique capabilities and therefore a competitive advantage. This was explicitly mentioned by Mr. Van 't Klooster.

For a consultant using A.I. as a change approach for LSI, it is essential to take the role of facilitator during the change process and not the expert role. The client and all stakeholders are responsible for the content of the process. Besides the role, Mrs. Jacobs mentioned that it is important for the consultant to time the different phases of the 4-D cycle correctly and provide or insure that there is a connection/overlap between each phase. The use of the right language during communication is very important for the process and the consultant needs to create a situation where there is trust. If a consultant wants to use A.I. it is vital that you truly believe in positive thinking. It is not a trick or skill that can be learned, rather it has to match with your personality.

#### **Assurance of A.I. After the Program**

During the research a fourth key success factor for the use of A.I. during LSI was found, this success factor is 'the assurance of A.I. after the change program'. During the interviews Mrs. Jacobs and Mrs. Reijmers explicitly mentioned that assurance of A.I. by the management is essential for the program and it is a precondition to start a LSI using the A.I. approach. They referred to a written agreement or contract with the client for this assurance. Without this assurance, these consultants would refuse to start a LSI using the A.I. approach. They see this assurance contract as an essential element of the LSI.

It is vital that the client obligates itself to A.I. and that after the program is completed A.I. is anchored into the organization. This can be done by assigning several key persons in the organization as ambassadors/champions for this approach. These champions are motivated and believe in A.I. and will continue to use it within the organization. All consultants agreed that assurance can be achieved by involving key persons during the project.

The design team is a very important element for the success of the change project. A successful design team is composed out of people having key functions in the organization, they do not require formal authority per se however. It is essential that

members of the design team are committed to the A.I. approach, as is the case for consultants using this approach. This has a two-sided effect, the design team is more active in being an ambassador for the change approach and after the program's completion they are an insurance that A.I. will be used in the organization.

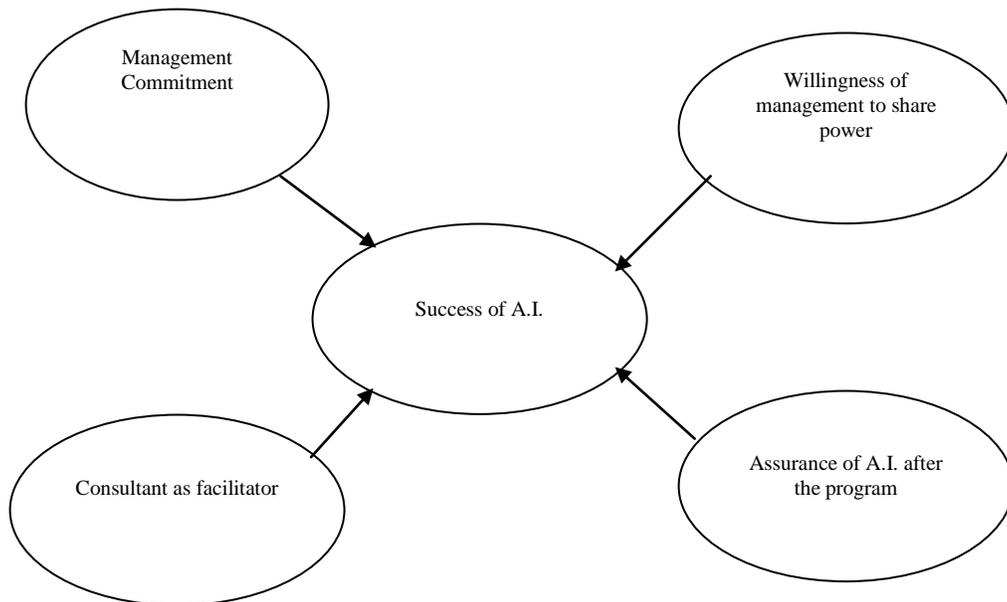
This assurance of A.I. after the LSI is an additional success factor, besides the three factors introduced in the theory section. Assurance of A.I. after the change is important for every consultant, however they differ in their approach to achieve this assurance. Mrs. Jacobs and Mrs. Reijmers mentioned explicitly that this is done through a formal contract and Mr. Masselink sees this assurance taking place through the members of the design team.

## CONCLUSION

During this study an attempt was made to see whether three success factors of LSI, as described by Van Der Zouwen (2011), could be considered to be key success factors when using the A.I. approach. The central research question for this study was: “*What are the key success factors of Appreciative Inquiry?*” As the results have shown it is clear that one more key success factor can be added.

From the literature and the interviews it can be concluded that *management commitment*, *willingness of management to share power*, and *consultant as facilitator* are key success factors for the use of the A.I. approach during LSI. Additionally, a fourth key success factor was found, namely; *assurance of A.I. after the programme*. This fourth key success factor comes solely from the interviews and was not found in the literature research. Due to this additional key success factor, the conceptual model as presented in the theory section needs to be adjusted. This adjustment can be seen in figure two.

FIGURE 2



Conceptual model with a fourth key success factor

All relations are positive, which means that the higher the independent variable the higher, or the more successful, the dependent variable (outcome of the A.I. approach). Besides other factors which can influence the successfulness of an A.I. approach, these can be considered to be key success factors based on this research. When one of these factors is too low, the outcome will most likely be less successful or even cause the program to fail. Literature on A.I. does not mention assurance explicitly while it can be considered to be a key success factor of A.I. The four factors are also not mutually exclusive and it is apparent that some of the independent variables also reinforce each other. Getting assurance, for example, will be nearly impossible without a committed management and a truly committed management will probably be more willing to share power.

The three success factors which were selected from theory were confirmed by the consultants who were interviewed. These were also described as very important, or key, success factors during an LSI using the A.I. approach. The most important factor for the consultants is the willingness of management to share power. Even when managers know that the authority they have will not change, they can still feel that their informal authority or power is changing. During A.I., managers will have to share this power with other managers who are higher in the hierarchy and also with employees lower in the hierarchy. Besides this factor the management consultant requires a fully committed management for the change approach. The management must commit itself to this type of change approach. Besides these two factors there must be an assurance of the A.I. program. If there is no assurance of A.I. after the program some consultants won't even start the A.I. approach for a LSI. This is a very important success factor and sometimes a pre-condition for consultants. The consultant must be a facilitator for the change approach during a LSI. This research has shown that is very important for a consultant to facilitate the process to make the A.I. approach successful.

## **DISCUSSION**

When investigating the literature there was little theory found on the applicability of the A.I. approach in specific situations. Therefore one question asked during the interviews was "How does a consultant decide if A.I. is applicable to the situation?" The consultants

provided contradicting answers, because two stated that it was applicable in every situation and two stated that it depended on some factors. The essential factor, mentioned by the consultants that influenced the applicability of A.I. was the embracement of the client organization of A.I. If the client organization does not embrace A.I. then it is not applicable. A contradiction was found when two consultants stated that A.I. is applicable in every situation, for example when an organization wants to downsize. Two other consultants mentioned that A.I. was not applicable in every situation, such as extreme conflict situations. Therefore, it is useful to further investigate this literature gap and the contradicting results found in this study.

Two consultants stated that in situations where financial problems/scarcity occurs A.I. is applicable. This is due to its participation/involvement of employees and managers, which gains synergy between several hierarchical layers within the organization. This will result in the feeling by employees that they are important to the organization and therefore become committed. Additionally, two consultants mentioned that there is a cultural difference between the embracement of A.I. For example, an American company, with an Anglo-Saxon culture, would be more willing to close the organization for three days to do an A.I. summit than a Dutch organization, which has a Rhineland culture. Further research on this topic needs to be conducted in order to confirm this.

Another aspect that requires further investigation is the fact that A.I. has a short-term or long-term positive effect on the results of an organization. One of the consultants mentioned that A.I. mostly affects the long-term results and barely affects the short term results. Therefore, it is useful to investigate the time aspect of the effect of A.I. on the results of an organization.

One limitation of this research is the fact that only four consultants were interviewed. This creates limitations for the generalization of the results of this research, therefore further research into this subject is required.

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