AI Practitioner

The Promise of Appreciative Cities

Compelling the Whole to Act

Barbara Lewis
Karen Roney

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Inside this issue

Welcome to November 2013 issue of AI Practitioner

"The Promise of Appreciative Cities: Compelling the Whole to Act" is full of detailed examples where cities have applied AI: in Police, Fire, Purchasing and Transportation departments; community engagement in major regeneration initiatives and local initiatives supporting a region's long-term vision. Editors Barbara Lewis and Karen Roney, who live in the United States and have been involved in award-winning work in this area, describe how cities have embedded AI over many years and set out the promise of even greater AI use.

In the Feature Choice, Dayle O'Brien in Australia describes a change and transition theory, Four Rooms of Change, that she has found invaluable in her coaching practice. Taking a strengths-based approach to the model, she describes how people move through the Rooms and learn to love change.

In this Research Notes, Jan Reed says "Goodbye and keep going" as she feels it is time to hand over to others. We thank her for her skill and wisdom in developing the column over four years. Showcased in the column is a study of Caravaggio's paintings using AI as the research framework.

In AI Resources we welcome a new editorial team: Matt Moehle (USA), and Roopa Nandi and Hardik Shah (India). They bring their research, academic and consulting backgrounds to develop the next phase of this column.

Anne Radford
Editor, AI Practitioner

The Promise of Appreciative Cities
Compelling the Whole to Act

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Leading topics for AI Practitioner 2014
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Appreciating People(AP) works with people, communities, businesses, charities and organisations to help them get the best out of themselves and make positive change happen
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AppreciatingPeople
inspiring strength based organisations

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Engagement and Beyond
Tackling Tough Infrastructure Issues with Appreciative Inquiry

In Denver, Colorado, Appreciative Inquiry has been used for tackling tough infrastructure projects – traffic services, financial shortfalls, and commuter rail. This article explores how the AI process can be tailored to individual project goals and circumstances for optimal results.

This article presents three stories of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in the same city, Denver, Colorado. All three projects deal with tactical infrastructure issues related to transportation and finance – merging departments, addressing budget shortfalls and building commuter rail. While projects spanned about 10 years, they are connected, as the first successful initiative led indirectly to each of the others. Project champions and participants, who had first-hand experience with AI, chose to apply the process to new challenges as they arose. In reflecting on these three cases, two themes emerge:

- *The compelling case for AI* – Why did Denver embrace AI for these three distinctly different applications?

- *The flexibility of the 4-D process* – How do we manage the realities of time and project circumstances while maintaining the integrity of the 4D process?

True to the AI process, this article begins with the stories and then reflects on these themes and future opportunities. Each story presents the challenge, key choices made in the design, and short and long-term outcomes.

Creating one organization, dedicated to providing hassle-free travel on Denver streets
In 2001 in the City of Denver, Transportation Engineering and Traffic Operations were brought together under one director, Robert Kochevar. This merger became

The Denver skyline

an opportunity to take a close look at how the work of managing city travel was accomplished and to create structures and work processes to best support the exceptional customer service that was everyone's goal. While the two departments had been combined for over a year on the organizational chart, it was time for the two functions to act as one, establishing common identity, focus, structures and processes.

Key Choices

Recognizing that a traditional organizational development intervention would likely be focused on – and would thereby amplify – the tension and split between the departments, the consultants proposed an AI process. Such a process would, they explained, forge the relational infrastructure on which the future merged organization would depend. It would be future and possibility focused (vs. past and problem), and would build positive momentum for the organizaton's structural transition. The director boldly embraced the AI methodology and approached this project with excitement, commitment and, frankly, some trepidation based on past attempts to integrate, and lack of staff interest to merge together as one working organization.

We began by assembling the core team, representatives from each department. Rather than meeting for two solid days, they held four four-hour planning meetings, during which they framed out the project and made a number of bold, critical decisions:

1. Project name The project name had to ignite enthusiastic participation among staff and other contributors. After considerable discussion, the team settled on "Creating One Organization Committed to Hassle Free Travel in Denver". It spoke to the organizations' shared goal, in down-to-earth language that would have universal appeal.

2. Participants The team decided to invite a broad range of participants including staff, partner agencies, local businesses, citizens and transportation groups throughout the city and county. They wanted to hear from a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders, to ensure that everyone travelling within the city and county had a voice in the future of the new organization.

3. Process The team chose a two-and-a-half-day design, delivered in one full day and three half days, spread over six weeks. To address significant time constraints and limits on participant availability, the process, as shown in Figure 1 below, started in Discovery with the whole system (both internal and external participants), moved to Dream and Design by a smaller group of internal staff, and then returned to the whole system in Destiny.

Day one involved over 150 people and included all stakeholder groups. It focused on identifying the "root causes of success" and unleashing positive possibilities for the future. Day one focused on answering the questions:

Interactive exercises help participants understand each other's perspectives.

- When we and other Traffic Engineering and Operations organizations have been at their best, how do our structures and work processes help us to deliver hassle-free travel on Denver streets?

- What best practices have we developed – perhaps unintentionally – that we can transport and build upon, as we work to provide higher and higher levels of customer service?

Days two and three (each half a day), included only internal staff. Participants mined the data, identifying the positive core of the merged organization and making structural choices about the future. These sessions answered the following questions:

1. If we could create anything that we wanted in this department, what would it be?

2. How can we leverage our strengths to bring us closer to that dream?

3. How will we clear out organizational obstacles so that hassle free travel will be the norm, rather than the exception, on Denver city streets?

Day four (also half a day) engaged both internal and external stakeholder groups in implementation of the new department. Participants established the new department's priorities and launched implementation teams (employee and external stakeholder partnerships) to deliver the intended changes.

Short- and long-term outcomes
The process gave the disparate agencies an experience of working collaboratively in service of the common good. At the same time, it established the common vision, values and goals across the new, merged organization's customer/supplier value chain.

Additional outcomes included:

- Creation of a clear compelling mission for one organization

- Enhanced cooperation and collaboration between sections within the department

- Sense of being one department, working together to accomplish a goal

- Enhancing trust and respect, supporting a positive work environment

- Engaging city-wide players in working with the department to solve traffic issues, collaboratively

- Creation of agreed upon performance standards for ALL employees within this department

Figure 1: The process chart for a world-class transportation project

DENVER TRAFFIC SERVICES:
4Ds BEGIN AND END WITH WHOLE SYSTEM ENGAGEMENT

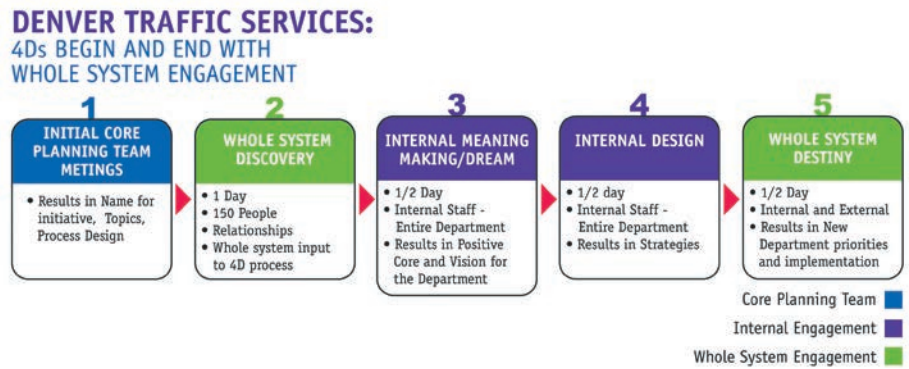Figure 2: Denver Finance: 200 trained interviewers bring data from 600 into the AI process

DENVER FINANCE:
200 TRAINED INTERVIEWERS BRING DATA FROM 600 INTO THE 4D PROCESS

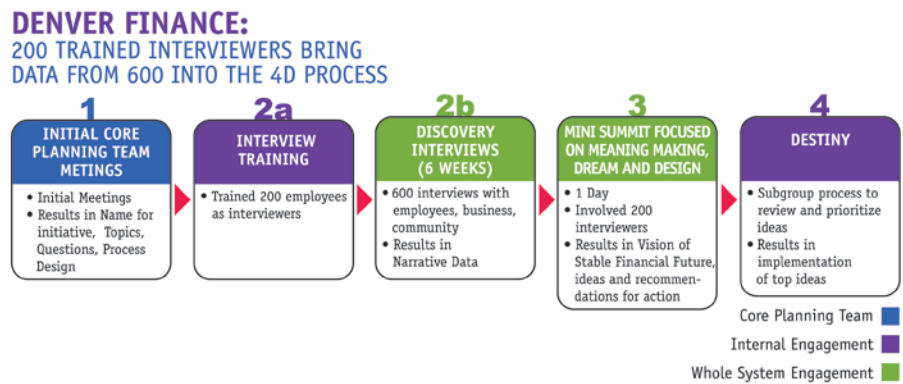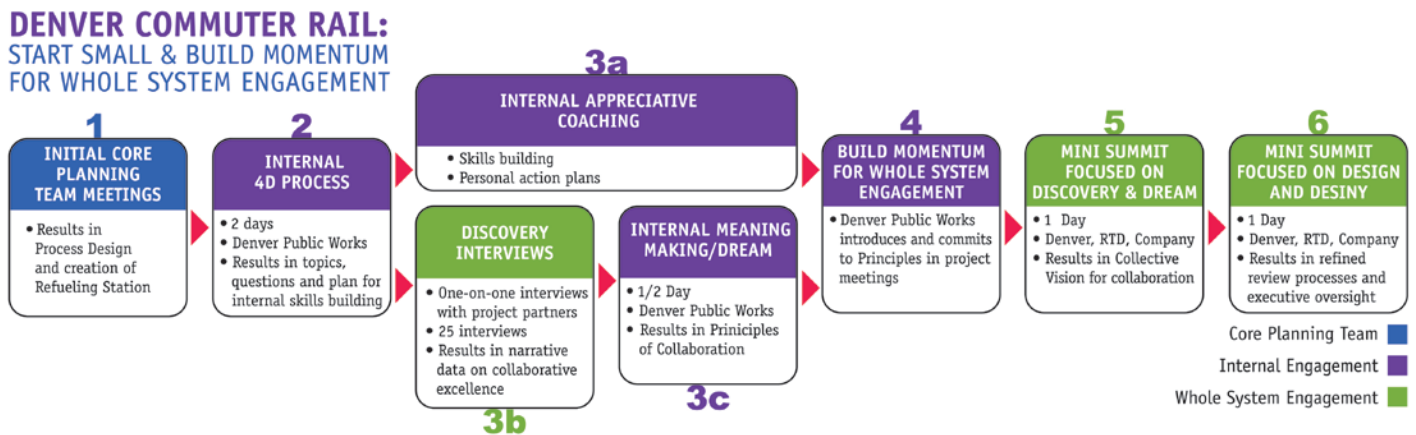Figure 3: Denver commuter rail: Start small and build momentum for whole system engagement

DENVER COMMUTER RAIL:
START SMALL & BUILD MOMENTUM FOR WHOLE SYSTEM ENGAGEMENT

Both leaders and consultants recognized that broad engagement would build understanding of and commitment to outcomes.

- Co-locating key players to increase communication and strategic planning

- Minimizing redundancies, re-work and duplication, by streamlining processes and systems

Best practices in challenging times

In spring of 2003, the City and County of Denver faced a dire situation. They were projecting a $70 million budget shortfall for the coming year. At the same time, a pending election – combined with term limits – meant that the mayor, 11 of 13 city council members and a number of key appointed leaders would be leaving their jobs in a few short months.

As none of the "normal" players were prepared to make wildly unpopular fiscal decisions, the Office of Finance Director, Margaret Brown, took a brave leap. She and fellow leaders initiated a city-wide AI process: "Thriving in 2004 and Beyond: An Employee Challenge". Its purpose was to enhance cross-functional relationships and mutual support, while engaging a broad cross-section of City and County employees in discovering and transporting financial best practices across departmental silos, and identifying creative revenue-generating opportunities.

Key choices
Both leaders and consultants recognized that broad engagement would build understanding of and commitment to outcomes, even those that were controversial or potentially negative. This insight shaped our decision to quickly involve as many employees as possible in positive, proactive, possibility-based conversations that would help them understand, consider and act in service of the whole. As shown in Figure 2 below, the process began with broad engagement of the whole system in Discovery, moved to engage interviewers in Dream and Design and then focused on subgroup work in Destiny.

Purpose and inquiry
Over a series of two-hour sessions, core team members articulated the purpose of the initiative ("finding creative solutions in hard times") and determined topics ("making a contribution", "courageous acts", "best practices in challenging times", and "one success at a time"). In consultation with the team, the consultants crafted appreciative questions that explored these provocative topics.

Interviews
We trained 200 people to conduct 600 face-to-face interviews over a six-week period. Interviewees included a broad cross-section of city employees, all of whose future was a stake, along with a small number of local businesses. The latter were included so that the City might learn about financial best practices in private industry, and so that the broader community would be engaged in resolving the city's challenge.

Participants spent time considering short-term steps that they could take cross-functionally, within their departments and at an individual level.

Meaning-making and Dreaming
All 200 interviewers came together with their data and stories for a one-day mini-summit. The goals of the gathering were to articulate best practices, envision a stable financial future and take first steps toward a sustainable path forward.

Design and Destiny
Participants spent time considering short-term steps that they could take cross-functionally, within their departments and at an individual level. At the same time, people were identifying a number of cost-savings and revenue-generating ideas that would involve charter change (i.e. changes to the city charter, that by law needed to be approved either by City Council or the public). Having anticipated that this might be the case, the core team designed a process that enabled participants to share this kind of recommendation – without spending time planning or processing their insights.

They wrote ideas and suggestions on sticky notes, which they posted on a wall during the Design phase. As other conversations took place, a subgroup tracked the patterns and prepared to share briefly what they had found with the larger group. When the meeting ended, these recommendations were handed off to Office of Finance representatives for further review and consideration.

In the months following, this subgroup fleshed out recommendations, prioritized them and carried them forward for further consideration. This adaptation enabled participants to work productively both during and after the gathering, designing and implementing individual, department-level and cross-agency cost-savings and revenue-generating projects within their spheres of influence.

Short- and long-term outcomes
As a direct result of the Thriving initiative, the City achieved the following:

- Ongoing voluntary suggestions (up to 50 emails per day)

- Increased employee commitment to controversial cost-savings measures that were already under way

- Consolidation of services to reduce duplication

- Consolidation of agencies from leased space to City-owned space

- Downsizing of fleet services ($370,000 savings)

- Reduced building security ($358,000 per year savings)

- Development of a new incentive retirement program ($1.5MM per year savings)

Said Margaret Brown, former director of the Office of Finance, "Instead of employees retrenching with fear for the loss of their jobs, they engaged in creative and

'What in normal times would have been a top-down process became instead a powerful example of engaging employees and employee commitment at every level.' Margaret Brown, former director of the Office of Finance

effective problem-solving. What in normal times would have been a top-down process became instead a powerful example of engaging employees and employee commitment at every level. By working across agency lines and partnering across silos, we created a positive focused direction for the years to come."

Mobilizing high-performing partnerships for a world-class transportation project

In late 2010, the City of Denver Public Works Department created a team of 12 veteran professionals responsible for bringing commuter rail in and out of the city of Denver, Colorado. The team's role was to ensure the success of what was dubbed the Eagle P3 Project, and to work in liaison and partnership with both the Regional Transportation District (RTD) and the construction company, Denver Transit Partners.

The Eagle P3 project, a major part of the FasTracks transit expansion approved by Denver area voters in 2004, involves two commuter rail corridors which extend to Denver International Airport and the city's western suburbs. In addition to the technical and neighborhood issues associated with integrating the $1.8 billion rail corridors into the city's established urban core, the "Eagle" is the first major transit project in the USA to include a private party who builds, finances and operates the system. Recognizing the project's complexity and significance, Denver launched an AI process to create an efficient collaborative partnership to ensure the project's success.

Key choices
The core team from Denver Public Works – Brian Pinkerton, Jennifer Hillhouse and Peter Baertjen – brought a steadfast commitment to a positive, inclusive approach, coupled with realism about what it would take to engage the partners of this high risk, technically complex and fast-paced project. This led them to define several essential conditions for the AI process:

- The process would need to start with Denver Public Works and build interest and momentum for whole-system engagement with the three partners, Denver, RTD and the private company, Denver Transit Partners.

- The Denver Public Works team would need to hone their skills in facilitative leadership, collaboration and positive communications.

- Given the pace of the project, its tight budget and technical complexity, the process needed to produce concrete action plans for streamlined project planning and review.

Of these conditions, the most challenging was the condition that we start small and build to engage the three partners; after all, AI is all about whole-system engagement. However, it was clear that the three entities (Denver, RTD and the company Denver Transit Partners) were not prepared to commit to coming

> The core team ... brought a steadfast commitment to a positive, inclusive approach, coupled with realism about what it would take to engage the partners.

together for an AI process. The project was simply too fast-paced, technically complex, financially perilous and politically contentious ... and there was no single champion to bring them all to the table.

To meet the conditions identified by the core team, we designed a multi-phase process, beginning with the Denver Public Works team and then expanding to include the project partners. The process started with a two-day AI workshop with the Denver Public Works team, followed by interviews with people at different levels within all three organizations and concluded with two "whole system" one-day mini-summits. This adaptation allowed the AI process to build momentum and gain credibility before the different parties were convened together.

As shown in Figure 3 the phased approach also moved from team development to individual skill building to collaborative planning.

1. Team Development The initial two-day AI process engaged the Denver Public Works team in identifying the keys to successful collaboration.

Participants in this meeting focused on three things:

- Creating and defining the concept of operating together as a refueling station where team members could come for information and insights, new energy and support

- Launching the longer-term process by generating topics and providing input to questions on collaborative excellence for an inquiry with all three partners

- Developing a list of interview candidates from the three project partner agencies, and signing up to conduct interviews

2. Individual skill building Members of the Denver Public Works team received one-on-one appreciative coaching focused on individual collaborative strengths, honoring each team member's unique collaborative style. Each person created an action plan for how they would nurture and contribute these strengths every day. The coaching element complemented the team's ability to be effective champions of collaborative excellence both during the AI process and throughout the monumental Eagle P3 project.

3. Collaborative cross-agency planning In this phase, the process broadened to include the three project partners, Denver, RTD and the company Denver Transit Partners. Based on topics and data from the first workshop with Denver Public Works, the consulting team worked with the core team to craft an interview on collaborative excellence. The Denver Public Works team then conducted interviews with RTD and Denver Transit Partners staff members at different levels within their organizations.

The map for the Eagle P3 Commuter
Rail Project
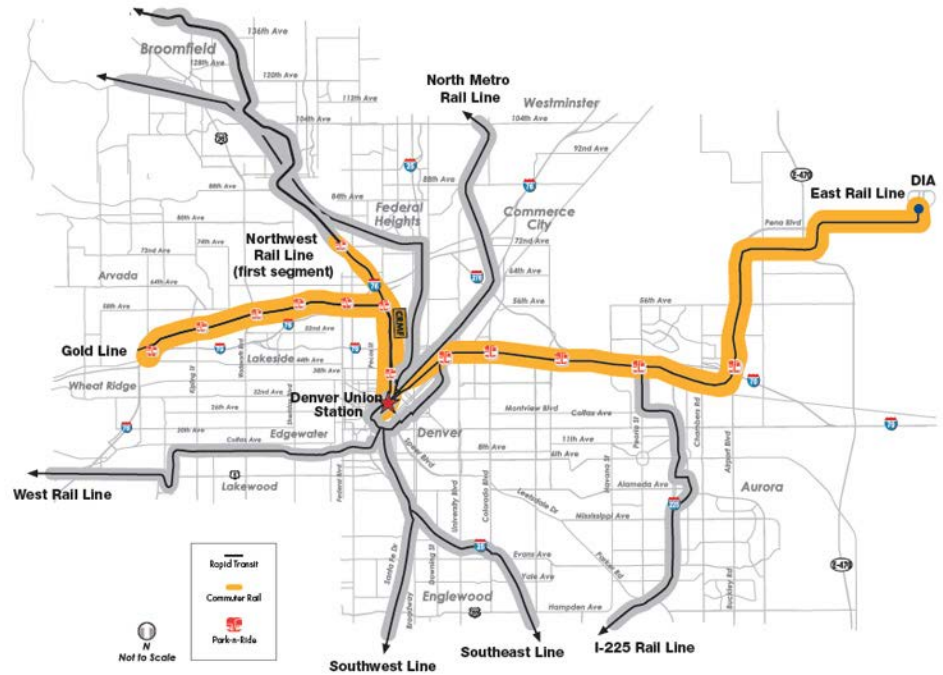
Upon completion of the interviews, Denver Public Works met for half a day to conduct a narrative analysis of the stories and insights that had been collected through the interviews, and forge a set of "principles of collaboration". They began introducing these principles in project meetings and communicating their commitment to adhere to the principles, initiating a shift in project communications. This shift help generate interest in the AI process and support for cross-agency meeting by managers within RTD and Denver Transit Partners.

Finally, City of Denver, RTD and Denver Transit Partners team members came together for a two one-day mini summits. The first day covered Discovery and Dream, focusing on understanding each other's perspectives and developing a common vision of the importance of working together in moving forward as efficiently and smoothly as possible. The second day, Design and Destiny, focused on bringing the principles of collaboration to life on real-world Eagle P3 project issues. Innovation teams, with representatives from all three stakeholder groups (Public Works, Denver Transit Partners and RTD), formed to address specific segments of the rail project, and to develop improved processes for decision-making and executive oversight.

Short and long-term outcomes
The Eagle P3 AI process resulted in streamlined decision-making processes. Specifically, the project partners refined the review and approval processes for specific segments of the commuter rail line and created a more comprehensive and functional executive oversight structure.

Denver International Airport: The challenge of creating a rail network to link the airport and the city center

In addition, the process improved the relationships between the three stakeholder groups, restoring the partners' commitment to working together to get the job done right. According to Lesley Thomas, city engineer and deputy manager for the Denver Department of Public Works, the process "provided a framework to bring three already skilled groups together and make them even better, with greater understanding and appreciation of their strengths and defined roles."

Finally, members of the core group articulated several attitudinal and relational shifts within and across the teams, which they believed were predictors of positive outcomes for the project:

- Acceptance that all parties are working toward the same end goal

- Letting go of preconceived notions about each other

- Reinforcement of personal commitments to dive into changes and see the project through

- Increased flexibility and appreciation of one another's roles

- Recommitment to keeping things positive, and to seeking new approaches and solutions

Reflecting on the process, one of the core group members commented, "We've heard from a lot of people, including upper management, that they were so thankful that we did this process and they wish other jurisdictions would do the same. We're on a great path forward," said Jennifer Hillhouse, City and County of Denver core team.

AI holds the promise of breaking down silos within departments and among agencies as well as across different segments of the community to focus the 'whole system' on what brings our the best.

Closing reflections

Comparing these three highly effective processes focused on tough infrastructure issues for the same city, we see two overarching themes related to why the AI process was selected and how it was applied.

The compelling case for AI
While cities are starting to use AI more and more, it is not yet a standard part of their facilitation and engagement toolbox. Furthermore, when city officials think of AI, it is often in the context of broad visioning and strategic direction. So, what compelled engineers and financial managers in Denver to use AI in these three tactical projects?

One commonality was that, in each case, the person who recommended AI as the right process was well respected and trusted by the city as well as being well versed in AI and bold leaders who were open to new ways of working and willing to take risks. They recognized that the task before them would only succeed if they increased people's engagement with and commitment to the change; and if they forged the relational infrastructure that would empower new and innovative action.

Capitalizing on the flexibility of the 4D cycle
Each of these processes responded to challenging realities (significant time constraints, limits on participant availability and hard deadlines) by designing 4D processes that unfolded over a series of gatherings. Each gathering contained elements of all four Ds – though some focused primarily on Discovery, others on Dream, Design or Destiny. In this way, both process continuity and the integrity of the 4D process were maintained and desired outcomes were achieved. The first two projects involved broad whole-system engagement in the beginning while the last was designed to build momentum for whole-system engagement at the end. Together, these efficient and creative designs illustrate how an AI process can be tailored to address individual project goals and circumstances.

These three cases are about Denver's tactical infrastructure issues, and they embody provocative and relevant visions for the future – hassle free travel, thriving in turbulent times, high-performing partnerships and world-class transportation. As cities face more tactical issues, AI holds the promise of breaking down silos within departments and among agencies as well as across different segments of the community to focus the "whole system" on what brings out the best in the community and the places where we live, work, study and play.

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