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Appreciative Leadership: Responding Relationally to the Questions of Our Time

The world has changed, the questions challenging leadership have changed, and hence the nature of leadership must change. This article introduces *Appreciative Leadership*, a repertoire of life-affirming, relational strategies and practices to address the challenges of the 21st century.

Our bookshelves are full of leadership books written to answer questions similar to those put forth by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner in their bestselling book, *The Leadership Challenge* (1987): “How do you get other people to want to follow you? How do you get other people, by free will and free choice, to move forward together on a common purpose? Just how do you get others to want to do things?” (p. 1) For decades these questions have set the stage and prescribed what it means to be a leader and what is expected of leaders. They clearly advance the idea that leadership is about individual leaders being able to make other people do things!

While these questions may have been of use when they were written, it is not hard to see that today the world is asking those who would be leaders a very different set of questions. Do you hear us? What do we need to do to be included and heard? Do you understand that we are one humanity with many different beliefs, preferences and practices that are all okay? How do we Africans, Middle Easterners, Asians, Americans, Latinos and Europeans, who are very different from each other, work and live well together? How do we all have a life that is healthy, affordable, safe and sustainable?

These questions are not so much about how leaders influence people to act, but rather about how leaders hear and respond to the voices of people in organizations and communities around the world. The old model of leadership command-and-control has given way to leadership processes that enable people,

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in the words of Steve Haeckel, to “sense and respond” (1993). For us, these questions are an invitation to Appreciative Leadership.

What follows is a brief overview of the ideas in our book *Appreciative Leadership*. These notions emerged first from our informal everyday research as consultants (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader, 2010, pp. xvii-xx) and were later derived from hundreds of interviews and focus-group narratives about leadership that we gathered and synthesized (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader, 2010, pp. xx-xxii). They are the foundation for our leadership development program, leadership team building and leadership coaching activities. We hope they will stretch your thinking and give you practical ways to work with leadership from an appreciative paradigm.

Appreciative Leadership defined

We define Appreciative Leadership as the relational capacity to mobilize creative potential and turn it into positive power – to set in motion ripples of confidence, energy, enthusiasm and performance – to make a positive difference in the world (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader, 2010, p. 3). Embedded in this definition are four formative ideas about Appreciative Leadership:

- 1. Appreciative Leadership practices are relational.** All work, indeed all life, occurs in relationship. Ken Gergen offers the most substantive understanding of relational capacities in his book, *Relational Being* (2009). “None of the qualities attributed to good leaders stands alone. Alone one cannot be inspiring, visionary, humble or flexible. These qualities are the achievements of a coactive process in which others’ affirmation is essential.” For Gergen, “Leadership resides in the confluence” (p. 331). Relational capacity means that we accept relationships as always present, as surrounding us and infusing us with their presence, as the context for all that we do and are. The Appreciative Leadership task is then to become relationally aware, to tune into patterns of relationship – to see, hear, sense and affirm what is already happening in order to join in and perform with it.
- 2. Appreciative Leadership practices are positive and life affirming.** The processes and practices of Appreciative Leadership grow from a positive worldview, a set of beliefs and a way of seeing people and situations that is uniquely and by choice positive and life affirming. It is a worldview that seeks to hold each and every person in positive regard. The Appreciative Leadership task is to understand that everyone has unique gifts and creative potential that come forth when invited through affirmation, inquiry and dialogue.

'It is precisely through inquiry that appreciative leaders realize and unleash not their own but other peoples' genius.'
David Cooperrider

3. *Appreciative Leadership turns potential into positive power (results).* At the heart of Appreciative Leadership are processes and practices for sensing potential and working with others to turn it into positive power – that is, into life-affirming results. With the support of Appreciative Leadership, people can outgrow the limits of their realities and move into a larger, more appreciative world. As David Cooperrider suggests, “The appreciative leader enlarges everyone’s knowledge and vision of the world ... not by having solid answers but with expansive questions. It is precisely through inquiry that appreciative leaders realize and unleash not their own but other peoples’ genius” (Schiller, Holland and Riley, p. xi). With Appreciative Leadership, powerful, sustainable results come from unleashing peoples’ creative energy and enthusiasm.
4. *Appreciative Leadership sets ripples of change in motion.* Our words, deeds and relationships influence those whom we touch and, subsequently, those with whom they related. Indeed, it might be said that we are all like pebbles cast into life’s pond. Our influence ripples outward, affecting people, organizations and communities well beyond our immediate reach. Appreciative Leadership processes set things in motion. By activating vibrant conversations and collaborative relationships, they unleash peoples’ creative potential, encouraging those people to do the same for others. In short, Appreciative Leadership sends waves of positive change rippling from one relationship to another – and to the world at large.

Five Appreciative Leadership Strategies
Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader, *Appreciative Leadership*, p. 1
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Five Appreciative Leadership strategies



The stories we collected during interviews and focus groups yielded a long list of appreciative practices at individual, one-to-one, team and organizational levels of engagement. We grouped the list of practices into five clusters resulting in what we now call the Five Core Strategies of Appreciative Leadership: Inquiry, Illumination, Inclusion, Inspiration and Integrity (p.23). Each strategy encompasses a wide range of practices that enable coordinated action and foster high performance.

Appreciative questions are a source of positive power.

The wisdom of inquiry: Asking positively powerful questions

Appreciative questions are a source of positive power. They can be used to weave relationships among people, departments and organizations to unleash a wealth of information, ideas and best practices, and to stimulate collaborative learning, innovation and high performance.

A simple inquiry benefited the distribution department of a major retailer when a surge in sales left its warehouse with an unexpected three-fold increase in deliveries. Rather than announcing a plan, the manager gathered people together and asked, “What creative ideas do you have for how we might handle this situation?” Responses were wide-ranging and surprising. “I’ll work all seven days next week.” “We could all work on Sunday and then have dinner together.” “We could hire a moving company.” “Some of our teenage sons and daughters might want to help out for the week!” None were solutions the manager had thought of and, most likely, none would have been acceptable had they been mandated.

This example illustrates how inquiry sets the stage for sincere collaboration. Asking people to share their stories of success and their ideas for the future while actively listening to what they have to say sends a message: “I value you and your thinking.” This, in turn, fosters creativity and commitment.

The art of illumination: Bringing out the best of people and situations

Appreciative leadership practices encourage inquiry and dialogue about strengths, high performance patterns and the root causes of success. They place attention on what works and why, rather than what does not work. Individual and collective strengths are a well of potential waiting to be discovered.

For example, when a major health care system invited patients to talk about their local hospital at its best, patients shared stories about the kitchen staff member who drew happy pictures and put them on food trays; the hospital housekeeper who ran a bath for a mother who had learned her son had cancer; and the physician who bought lobster and had the kitchen prepare a candlelit last dinner for a dying patient and his wife. The stories opened team members’ minds and hearts, helping them understand and deliver what patients valued most.

Through the practices of illumination, people learn about their strengths and the strengths of others.

Illumination helps people understand specifically how they can best contribute. Through the practices of illumination, people learn about their strengths and the strengths of others. They gain confidence to express themselves, take risks and support others in working from their strengths.

In order for decisions and plans for the future to satisfy and serve diverse groups of people, everyone connected to them must be invited into relationship and included in dialogue and decision-making.

The genius of inclusion: Engaging with people to co-create the future

Consciously engaging with people to co-create is an indispensable practice for unleashing the positive power of today's multicultural, multigenerational and multitalented workforce. Realities are crafted in relationship through conversations and collaborations. In order for decisions and plans for the future to satisfy and serve diverse groups of people, everyone connected to them must be invited into relationship and included in dialogue and decision-making.

Acts of inclusion range from personal to global. An HR manager we know shared how she invited several employees to collaboratively design a new professional development program. The outcome – a unique, innovative and highly successful program – reminded her that it is “easy it is to be creative when you include other people.” An architect shared that LEED (leadership in energy and environmental design) processes are based on inclusion, requiring that members of all trades – engineers, contractors and architects – collaborate from the start. Large group processes such as World Café, Open Space, Future Search and Appreciative Inquiry Summits take inclusion to scale, engaging dozens, or even hundreds, of stakeholders in strategic visioning, community development and organization transformation.

Inclusion creates an environment in which people are invited to contribute. As a result, they feel they are essential, that they matter and that they are safe to express their ideas. When people feel part of something, they care about it and for it. The genius of inclusion is that people commit to what they help create.

The courage of inspiration: Awakening the creative spirit

Inspiration embodies a courageous invitation to transcend the status quo. It breathes life into new possibilities, offering hope in the midst of crisis and giving people a reason and a way to go forward. It prompts innovation and actions not previously thought possible. Even when resources are abundant, nothing changes and nothing of merit happens without inspiration from a lively vision and path forward.

When low customer satisfaction scores threatened an insurance company's Medicare reimbursement, they chose to positively engage employees and customers in interviews, focus groups and summits focused on “service excellence.” Rapidly and collaboratively, people envisioned new ways of working and organized for action. Within eight months, ratings increased to above-average levels of customer satisfaction.

Appreciative Leadership practices support people to collectively envision a new or renewed future while creating hope that, together, they can bring their vision to life. In the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, “If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather

To be on the path of integrity is to be growing and evolving toward wholeness and helping others to do the same.

teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” The people we talked with do not yearn to be micromanaged, they yearn to be appreciated and engaged in meaningful, uplifting, enlivening work that serves the greater good.

The path of integrity: Making choices for the good of the whole

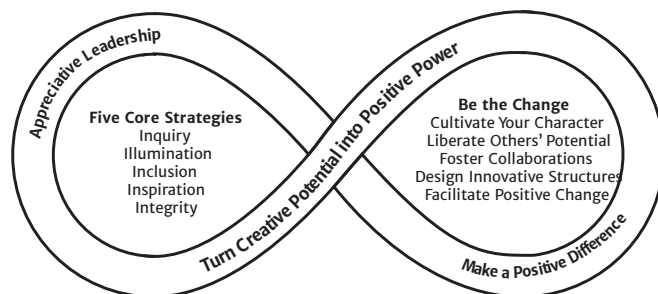
Appreciative leadership practices support people to consider and balance the whole organization, community or family in their decision-making. They invite people to attend to their connections to the whole, to give their best for the greater good and to trust others will do the same. To be on the path of integrity is to be growing and evolving toward wholeness and helping others to do the same. It is a path of health and healing, personally, relationally and globally.

For example, recognizing that layoffs were inevitable, a leadership team sought ways to foster health and wholeness for all involved. Beginning with immediate, open and transparent communication, they offered people a range of choices for how they might go forward. They sought volunteers to job share and/or work part-time. They hosted “town hall” meetings for people to talk about the situation and consider their options. They provided onsite career counseling, job fairs, and they opened their own networks to people seeking new jobs. And they provided opportunities for those who were left behind to meet and discuss “survivors’” guilt.

Because caring for the wellbeing of the employees and their families was a priority, the organization remained a valued community employer. News reporters following the process had only good news to share. The outplacement consultant that supported those departing commented that it was the most positive layoff he’d ever experienced.

Getting Results with AI
Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader, *Appreciative Leadership*, p. 197
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Getting Results with Appreciative Leadership



© *Appreciative Leadership: Focus on What Works to Drive Winning Performance and Build a Thriving Organization*
Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader, 2010

Appreciative leaders invite others to join them in seeking answers to the challenging questions of our time; questions that call us to first, to do no harm and then, to be a life affirming force for the greater good.

Attending to the whole may not be easy. It certainly is not business as usual, but it is what we need to create global prosperity, sustainability and peace.

Conclusion

The proposal put forth in this article is that the world has changed, the questions challenging leaders have changed, and hence the nature of leadership must change. Gone are the days when leaders of successful businesses and communities were driven by questions such as, “How do I get the most out of resources, financial and human?” “What do I do when people won’t commit to defined goals or comply with established policies?” “How do I influence people to do more for less, for the good of the company?” While still resounding in the halls of leadership, these questions have lost their charm. They are not relevant in a world of continual disruption, highly nuanced and public diversity, globalized economics and ecologies in danger. The world has become too complex to go forward without collaboration.

Leaders of thriving organizations, businesses and communities today are people who respond successfully to a categorically different set of questions. They wonder about and invite others to join them in seeking answers to questions such as, “How can our innovations in science and technology benefit humanity as a whole?” “How can we create a world that works for everyone?” “How do we create safe spaces, peace zones and healing for everyone who needs them?” “What is enough – food, water, access to nature, education, money, art – and how can we ensure that everyone has enough?” “How do I help people fulfill their greatest potential in service to humanity?” These questions ask leaders and organizations to first do no harm and then to be a life-affirming force for the greater good.

The strategies and practices of Appreciative Leadership offer a way forward, a repertoire of practices useful to those seeking to respond positively to these questions and meet the challenges of our time. Yet they are not the only way. Like all creative calls, they are part of a larger movement: a paradigm shift in the field of leadership.

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