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A Reflection on Leadership – From an Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner’s Perspective

An AI practitioner from Asia reflects on her consulting practice and life journey in AI and connects the inspirations she has taken from appreciative leadership. In a pragmatic culture, and being a pragmatist herself, her clients’ questions and concerns have strengthened her emphasis of the practicability of AI and Appreciative Leadership.

Practising Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has been a life-changing journey for me. Embedding AI principles in my life and consulting practice has brought me to another level of self-awareness. In this article, I share some of my reflections on leadership in an appreciative paradigm based on my professional and personal practice of AI.

Practising AI: A humble journey, for both practitioners and leaders.

How to sell AI to senior leaders and organizations – that has been one of the frequently asked questions from AI practitioners.

Thanks to my two mentors, Dr. Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, the co-authors of *Appreciative Leadership, the Power of Appreciative Inquiry* and many other publications on AI, one thing I learnt at the beginning of my AI journey was not to sell AI.

Playing the role of a consultant is sometimes similar to that of being a leader. People place high hopes on us, expecting us to be the most intelligent subject matter experts in the room and have all the answers and solutions. We are also expected to have full confidence in what we put forward and mean to achieve.

That reminds me of a dialogue with a client who once said to me: “Senior executives expect consultants to be highly intelligent, or otherwise they would not buy in.” My response was, “It should not be the matter of how smart I am as a consultant, but whether I can extract the wisdom and intelligence of your people to support your organization’s continuous growth.”



One step in co-creating a collective future that truly belongs to people

I trust the same applies to leaders in an appreciative paradigm – extracting the wisdom from people to co-create a collective future that truly belongs to them.

Evolving from ‘I know it all’ to ‘letting people shine’

Recently I had a chance to revisit the book *Appreciative Leadership* before delivering the program designed by Diana and Amanda. I highlighted the program’s aim by sharing their definition of Appreciative Leadership with the participants:

Appreciative Leadership is the relational capacity to mobilize creative potential and turn it into positive power – to set in motion positive ripples of confidence, energy, enthusiasm, and performance – to make a positive difference in the world.

I was struck by the notion of “relational capacity” when I first read the definition. It is not about skills or competencies – it is about growing our capacity, which allows us to embrace anything that enables us to practice appreciative leadership.

Unlike other conventional leadership approaches that emphasize leaders having the power and being the source to empower their people, what appreciative leaders do is to transform people’s creative potential into positive power. This is not about how skillful leaders can use their power to influence people to fulfill some pre-set purposes. In this case leaders become more like catalysts for letting people shine on their own.

A story about introducing Appreciative Leadership – what does leadership mean to our culture and organizations?

Introducing AI to organizations has become a major part of my consulting business. I am from Hong Kong, and my work mainly targets the Greater China and South East Asia regions.

Since my background is strongly tied to organizational learning and people development, my contacts are mostly HRs and in-house learning professionals who constantly look for new solutions to develop their executives and leaders.

What appreciative leaders do is to transform people’s creative potential into positive power.

The response has been encouraging – they love the idea of AI and Appreciative Leadership, and when it comes to the program’s title – interestingly enough, they would rather not call the program “Appreciative Leadership”. Their considerations were the same – AI was new to their people. When we used the word leadership in the program name, people would have certain expectations which could be very different from what AI offers...



A model was created in an Appreciative Leadership workshop to showcase an organization's ideal leader.

In a co-creative process, everybody is a part of the meaning making. Using languages that allows people to feel connected helps build a common foundation and move forward.

My first assumption was about cultural differences. We are in a high-power distance culture. The co-creative and relational practices in Appreciative Leadership may lead to feelings of being in less control, especially for senior executives.

Lately I have seen that it is more than a different cultural perspective. The organizations I have been in touch with are major ones that are willing to invest massively in people development, including employing renowned global brands of leadership development programs.

The leadership practice that supports AI takes a great deal of courage, in letting go of the long-established image of strong leadership, to allow people to unleash their full potential.

Use the language that people feel connected to

Another frequently asked question about applying AI in organizations is whether people can answer the Appreciative Interview questions.

During a recent AI sharing event, a young gentleman from a hotel group's learning and development team asked me about promoting a caring culture in their hotels. He tried to ask their staff to share their caring experiences, only to find that some participants were not able to blend in, particularly those who were experienced.

It sounded familiar to me. I came from a tough corporate background and was used to strict business language – result, performance, goals, targets... Caring for people does sound good, but business IS business. There is no mercy if a business does not make profit and sustain itself.

In some social or organizational cultures, words like caring, love, even high-point experience may sound too sentimental and make people feel uneasy. My recommendation is to choose words that sound more business-like and rational, such as to understand or to be understood.

What is amazing about languages is that they can be appreciated in multiple layers and meanings. In a co-creative process, everybody is a part of the meaning making. Using languages that allows people to feel connected helps build a common foundation and move forward.

Is being positive the key?

Another interesting question was raised at the same event – so would positive people work better when they practice AI?

The impact should not be caused by a person with unique qualities, but by the process and practice.

From a business and marketing viewpoint, packaging AI as a positive approach helps draw attention and attract the growing number of organizations eager to seek positive solutions to engage their people.

In my experience, positive emotions and relationships are by-products created naturally during the AI process. The aim is to unite people to construct what they want collectively based on their strengths and on best practice. It may sound too pragmatic to the strong believers in positivity, but to me AI is more about focus of energy and resources to achieve what we really want.

My response to that question was that positive people could make a certain impact on the group dynamics. I was not a born optimist, but I could still use the same process to generate the positive impact. The impact should not be caused by a person with unique qualities, but by the process and practice. If you were trained in the same process, you should be able to do it and create the same impact. Personally I would rather trust a process that works than relying on a person's charisma.

Imagine that same effect applies to leadership – what would happen if we could remove all the charismatic quality of a leader, and still generate the same positive impact in our organizations and communities?

REFERENCES

Whitney, D., Trosten-Bloom, A. and Rader, K. (2010) *Appreciative Leadership: Focus on What Works to Drive Winning Performance and Build a Thriving Organization*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)