

Leading Positive Performance: A Conversation about Appreciative Leadership

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KR: The three of us have spent the last several months writing a soon-to-be published book *Appreciative Leadership: Focus on What Works to Drive Winning Performance and Build a Thriving Organization*. Let's begin with an explanation of this term. What exactly *is* appreciative leadership?

DW: Appreciative leadership refers to a set of practices that turn human potential into positive performance. It is a positive, strengths-based approach to human performance, collaboration, and change management. It represents a shift from individualistic and deficit-based leadership processes to relational and dialogical leadership processes. It puts forth a fully affirmative way of working and leading based on the ideas that positive processes get positive results. In essence, Appreciative leadership draws on positive power to discover, learn from, and build upon the best in people and situations, and to make a positive difference in the world.

KR: So appreciative leadership has its roots in the positive movement and in Appreciative Inquiry in particular. Talk for a moment about Appreciative Inquiry.

DW: Appreciative Inquiry is the study of what gives life to human systems when they are at their best. It is an approach to human and organizational change, and it is based on the assumption that inquiry into and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams is itself transformational.

KR: What is it about Appreciative Inquiry that supports high performance in organizations?

ATB: One way it does this is by providing structures and forums for engaging diverse groups across functions, departments, and disciplines to join with customers and vendors in a conversation about the desired future.

KR: Specifically, how does this support high performance?

DW: Nothing stimulates creativity and innovation more than inclusion of different people, different perspectives, and different ideas. Inclusion enables people to exchange knowledge and ideas. It fosters engagement, commitment to a shared future, and collaborative action. It is generative.

KR: How else does Appreciative Inquiry support high performance in organizations?

DW: Appreciative Inquiry is unconditionally affirmative. It is a process to understand the organization when it is at its best. It builds upon an organization's track record of success, which in turn, inspires people to express and realize positive possibilities for the future.

KR: But, some would say focusing only on the positive is limiting. How do you address challenges and difficult issues?

ATB: We are not suggesting organizations deny or ignore problems. What we *are* saying is that focusing on strengths is a more effective path to transformation and finding solutions. When we study how an organization operates when it is at its best, we learn what it takes to grow, and change in positive directions.

KR: Tell me more.

DW: Appreciative Inquiry is predicated on the idea that organizations move in the direction of what they study. If this is true, then the choice of what to study – what to focus organizational attention on – is important and strategic. In other words, if we tend to get more of what we study, doesn't it make sense to study topics in a positive framework? The Appreciative Inquiry process enables organizations to build on strengths and best practices to set the agenda for learning and innovation on a topic of strategic importance.

KR: Can you give us an example?

DW: If we want high performance or quality, we want to study those times when the organization is performing at exemplary levels and the quality is flawless. From this process we can learn specifically what it takes to support high performance in all areas all the time.

KR: What does this suggest for the work of human performance technologists who seek to be catalysts for positive change? What would you tell them to do?

DW: The first thing I would recommend is that they learn Appreciative Inquiry. Second, I would tell them to learn to work in a way that is energetically positive.

KR: What does that mean?

DW: Working to be energetically positive means putting the principles of Appreciative Inquiry to work. Choose to inquire into success and positive possibilities, rather than problems. Choose to frame the issues and questions that guide dialogue and decision making in organizations. Frame them as statements of what we want more of, rather than statements of what we don't want. For example, study employee retentions as a positive framework, rather than turnover, which is a problem.

KR: What else can practitioners do?

DW: They can help create positive emotional environments in the workplace. The research is now very, very clear that emotions in general make a difference and that positive emotions make a crucial difference in human performance. Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina has clearly demonstrated that human beings flourish, gain confidence, and perform well in the presence of positive emotions. She puts forth a 3-to-1 ratio as the appropriate balance of positive to negative emotions. If we want innovation in our organizations, we need to surround ourselves with emotions like joy, happiness, creativity, and play. If we want achievement, we need to unleash optimism, hope and perseverance. So working in the energetically positive means both to choose to focus on what we want, positive frames of reference, and also to create positive emotional environments.

KR: Is there anything else you would add?

DW: The key is to remember that it all begins with you. What we find with Appreciative Inquiry is that when people apply it as a technique or methodology, it is not very effective. But when they learn it and it becomes their way of working, their way of being, and it gets as we say, "in their bones," they are then able to bring Appreciative Inquiry to life in coaching sessions, in team building, and in whole system organizational change processes.

KR: So that is the Power of One?

DW: Yes, that is the Power of One. When one person decides to live and work positively it sends out ripples of success into the world. When one person shares their story of success, others learn and can improve their performance.

KR: Now back to appreciative leadership. Diana and Amanda, you have said that through your research and consulting practices you have discovered that there are certain qualities of leadership, certain strengths and capacities, that compel others to follow. What are these strengths and capacities?

DW: Appreciative leaders understand that their job is to bring out the best in people and situations--to uncover potential and bring it to life. They do this in five interesting and unique ways, over and over again.

The first is that they practice **inclusion**. They actively engage diverse groups of people in all kinds of conversations and decisions.

ATB: In *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, there is a great story that illustrates this strategy. When Nutrimental Foods in Brazil was economically challenged and in need of a new direction, their founder and CEO, Rodrigo Loures, shut the company down for four days. He did this so that all 700 members of the workforce plus key customers and suppliers could participate in an Appreciative Inquiry Summit, or strategic planning meeting.

KR: What was the outcome?

ATB: The meeting was phenomenally successful. It let people talk over what worked in the system, what strengths needed to be leveraged, and what they believed needed to be done to turn things around. It generated widespread energy and enthusiasm for the future of the business, and resulted in a reported 66 percent increase in sales, a 422 percent increase in profitability, a 42 percent increase in productivity, and 95 percent employee satisfaction rate. There is no better testimony to the power of inclusion.

KR: That is a powerful story. What is the second strategy?

DW: Appreciative leaders lead with **inquiry**. They know that what is asked, the question itself, can make a difference. They employ *The Flip*®, which is a simple technique that we teach for helping people focus on the positive. *The Flip*® simply says that, when we are faced with a problem or negative issue, we should stop and ask ourselves what we really want and then reframe the question positively.

KR: Do you have an example?

DW: A research director at a nursing school was analyzing student graduation results. She caught herself getting ready to ask the same question she asked her colleagues every year: “Why are we failing 10 percent of our students?” She never liked asking this question, because it always seemed to demoralize her team. And, she never received any useful answers.

After learning about *The Flip*®, she decided to give it a try. She reworded her question to ask, “What have we done well that has helped 90% of our students graduate to go on to successful careers in nursing?” The very nature of the question acknowledged the people whose efforts were successful, and invited them to share their insights. This led to a better understanding of how success can be replicated. She said rephrasing this simple question made a tremendous difference in her organization’s performance.

KR: What is the third strategy?

ATB: Appreciative leaders regularly and consciously **illuminate** strengths. They are *strengths spotters* – a term coined by our colleague Peter Lang, with the Kensington

Consulting Center in London. They see the best in situations and people, and they call attention to what they see. They ask people to share stories of times when they accomplished results, when their performance was at its best, and when they were proud of what they had done. By taking those stories and breaking them apart, appreciative leaders uncover high performance patterns. They communicate and reflect back what they have found in affirmative and reinforcing language. They see the seeds of potential and they water them by assigning projects that grow people. They build teams based on people's strengths. They create appreciative organizations.

KR: And the fourth?

ATB: The fourth is **inspiration**. We have heard over and over the importance of vision. Appreciative leaders understand the importance of vision. They understand the power of images to compel people to action. But, they also understand that inspiration is more than just vision. People need to *share* the vision, but they also need to see the path forward and the resources necessary to get there. In sum, we believe there are three elements of inspiration. One is the vision, two is the path forward, and three is the belief that the organization has what it takes in skills, time, money, partnerships, and all realms of resources to achieve the vision.

I personally experienced this kind of inspiration when I went to work on the 2008 presidential campaign. I was greeted at the door by an enthusiastic organizer. She said, "Here's how we're going to win this election. We have called people and they have told us where they are leaning. We are only interested in canvassing people who are on the fence. Once they declare a candidate choice, they drop off the list. Here's the sign-up schedule for volunteers. You choose the time that works for you, and we will partner you with an experienced canvasser. We've got 68 days and 358 volunteers, which is all that we need to win." She painted a vision, she told me the path forward, and showed me that we had the resources to do the job. It gave me hope and confidence. It made me want to give what I had.

KR: What is the final strategy?

DW: The fifth, and perhaps most important strategy, is that appreciative leaders have **integrity**. They have personal authenticity. They say what they mean and mean what they say. But they also work for the good of the whole. Integrity is derived from the same root as "integral." It means *wholeness*. Appreciative leaders are whole in their own beings. They speak not only from their minds, but also from their hearts. They understand their work as service to the whole—the whole of their organizations, the whole of the community, and the whole of the planet.

KR: This seems like another example of the Power of One: one person making a difference through his or her thought or actions. I am curious, though. What can organizations do to create appreciative cultures and develop the capacity for appreciative leadership at all levels?

DW: We have all talked about this a lot. To cultivate appreciate leadership at all levels, organizations need to adopt strengths-based development practices. At an individual level, this helps people know and build upon their unique leadership capacities. We have an appreciative leadership development program, for example, at which people study their strengths, envision their futures, and design a path forward for their personal leadership development and career.

ATB: But there are many other strengths-based programs out there, as well. Organizations should look for programs that teach individuals to see themselves differently, but also to *act* differently. Training in Appreciative Inquiry, for example, will teach people how to practice relational respect and responsibility. They will understand the important of acknowledging and affirming strengths, studying what works, and actively engaging with different kinds of people – whatever the task.

KR: What skills and practices do teams need, if the goal is appreciative leadership at all levels?

DW: Teams need to organize themselves around questions, or more to the point, *positive* questions like, “What do we want to create more of?” In teams, appreciative leadership means actively creating forums for cooperating and creating along with other teams and departments, and making information and decisions transparent to everyone. It means organizing in ways that enable people to share their gifts. Peter Drucker described that really well. He said that leadership is “aligning strengths, so that weaknesses become irrelevant.” It is a great example of the kind of thinking that needs to take place in teams.

KR: How about at the organizational level? What needs to happen there?

ATB: Organizational systems and structures need to foster learning and engagement. There is a positive emotional climate, as evidenced in everything from reward and recognition systems, to marketing and advertising, and even to the physical space. These kinds of organizations measure and evaluate themselves on a triple bottom line – people, profit and planet – rather than pure profits.



DW: But the most important thing that is true in these settings is that the organizations are focused *outward*, as well as inward. Their missions are broad. People are

encouraged to think about their contribution to society. Employees may be given time off to offer their services to community organizations. Similar to building a house with Habitat for Humanity, they might help another organization build its own brand of appreciative leadership.

KR: Is there anything else you would add about appreciative leadership?

DW: The practice of leadership is on the brink of a paradigm shift. It is moving from authoritarian to collaborative practices. I am excited about the book the three of us are co-authoring on appreciative leadership to be released this summer. I believe it is on the vanguard, providing clear concepts and practical tools for a new generation of leadership. It describes how to be the kind of leader people want to follow: an appreciative leader, one who turns potential into positive power and gets results that make a positive difference in the world.