

Appreciative inquiry—a wider appreciation

An HR leader of a big company approached me recently with the need to build up appreciation culture in their company, because “the employees do not feel recognized and appreciated by their leaders”. He is thinking to have leaders at different levels go through training and learn how to appreciate employees in various scenarios.

The conversation with him raised my interest to think over some deeper questions.

- Why is appreciation seemingly more important now ?
- How can it be embedded into a corporate culture? And
- What are the underlying needs, apart from the important human need for recognition, that an appreciative culture meets in corporate context nowadays?

From a leadership perspective, in our experience, there are many reasons for a lack of appreciation:

- Leaders giving no feedback when needed, or when positive feedback is given, it is seen as inauthentic.
- Leaders who believe “they know best” and so tell others (who may even know better) how to do their jobs, telling them what to do and how to do it, with a tendency to micro manage due to a fear of uncertainty and/or lack of trust.
- An overbearing perfectionist culture, where celebration of individual/team success/progress is largely ignored, and failure/mistakes are highlighted with intention to make constant improvement.
- A culture of fear in organization with strong sense of hierarchy where followers do not wish to give their leaders feedback (i.e. a classic issue of projection) and leaders do not expect / invite feedback from followers.
- Overbearing leaders who intimidate employee moral due to their way of leading.
- Unbalanced leadership which is too task focused during a busy time whilst facing a degree of uncertainty which leads to more task focus and less people focus.
- A current majority of leaders who were mostly born before 1980 and have a different assumption about what good leaders should do, which is different from that of frontline workforce of generations Y and Z.

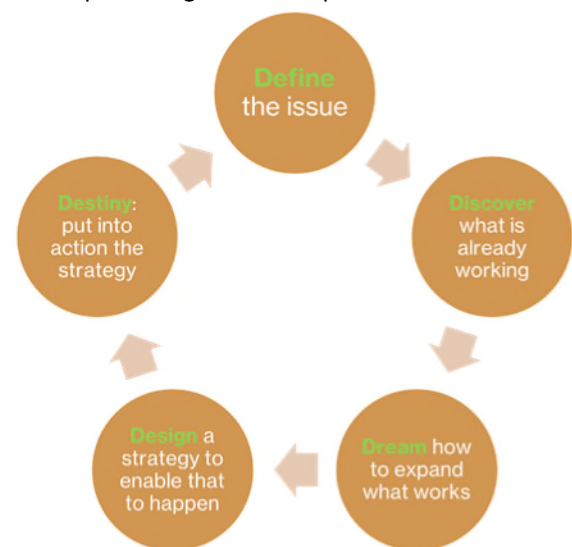
This may explain why Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Appreciative Leadership (AL) are having a renaissance. Both of these are seen as key for having an appreciative, positive culture.

AI was first identified a quarter of a century ago by Cooperrider and Srivastva in the mid 1980’s, who proposed that organisations had large untapped potential:

“What would happen to our change practices if we began all our work with the positive presumption that organizations, as centers of human relatedness, are alive with infinite constructive capacity?” — David Cooperrider

Therefore, the underlying assumption of AI is that organisations, teams and individuals have large untapped reserves of hidden potential that can be used to solve problems.

This idea was built on by them and Diana Whitley in mid 1990’s, with Diane and others publishing her five steps of AI in 2001:



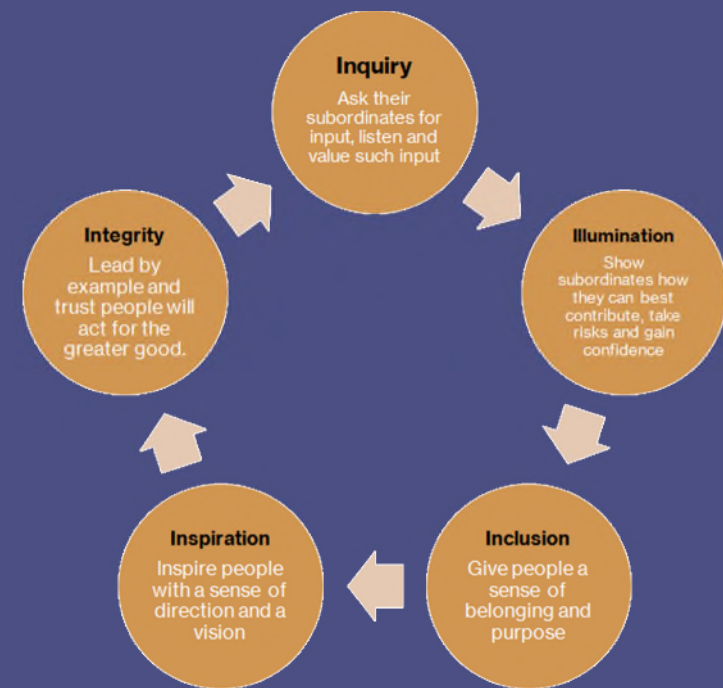
The thrust of today’s organisational development is to enable more agility and capability to deal with increased uncertainty. Our research over the past 3 years of over 600 leaders in 41 companies across 24 countries shows that most organisations and teams have a good overall score of 70% regarding the principles need for such agility, which indicates that organisations do indeed have untapped potential. And some of the best scoring principles are those which HR sometimes feel are lacking— Purpose and Freedom to Act (for more on this see earlier article “The wrong tree?”).

So, organisations have what they need implicitly, and with hidden potential what is missing is the leadership needed to untap such potential.

The use of AI on its own is not enough. There are three key problems with using AI in isolation:

- The use of AI focused on solving specific problems does not necessarily solve the overall lack of appreciation and release by leaders of the organisational potential.
- AI is like the use of the “Yellow Hat” of De Bono’s Six Hats. In ignoring the use of the other five hats, difficult questions are avoided, underlying issues can be missed, and some people may feel their issues are being minimised.
- The use of AI as a problem-solving methodology has moved away from the underlying need for a wider view of leadership and decision making

Diane Whitney and others followed up with the publication in 2010 of “*Appreciative Leadership – Focus on what works to drive winning performance and build a thriving organisation*”. This proposes that leaders need to demonstrate:



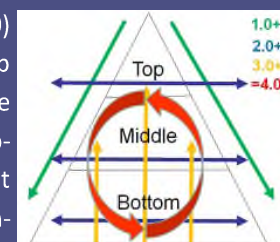
As a list it would be hard to argue against any of these. However, our research shows that there are three underlying issues :

- When the rubber hits the road, leaders are too busy to indulge in such an approach.
- It can create the opposite effect with leaders being too involved – for example, the overuse of “Inquiry” looks like micro-management, an issue identified with some 20% of leaders researched by us.
- It re-enforces the traditional assumption that leadership is done by leaders, and so paradoxically moves away from the distributed leadership approach indicated by Cooperrider. For more of this issue see earlier article “We don’t need another hero”.

Since the publication of AI and AL, many consultants have used and fine tuned the approach. For many HR professionals who are not fully aware of the details of AI and AL, an appreciative culture has been boiled down to the humanistic need for appreciation being shown. This also has pitfalls not least the reinforcement of inauthentic accolades or even sycophancy and, in transactional analysis terms, an “Adult – Child” relational culture rather than an “Adult – Adult” one. How best to avoid the pitfalls? Perhaps a wider appreciation is needed, based on recognition, understanding, awareness and/or acceptance not just on positive feedback and/or gratitude:

- An appreciation of the context, which is more complex and uncertain now than the mid 1980’s and yet few have heard of the principles of complexity science to navigate such VUCA times;
- An appreciation of the underlying scientific need for appreciation, which also links to the need for diversity and inclusion. The science shows that appreciation, diversity and inclusion are linked and mathematically needed when operating in increasingly uncertain contexts. An appreciation of why leaders find it sometimes hard to show appreciation when under stress and pressure and to know how better to handle such stress;
- An appreciation that organisations operating in a VUCA context will need misalignment and that conflicting interests are needed and to be navigated rather than dampened and eradicated.
- An appreciation that leaders do not know the answers, and should not be expected to know in VUCA times;
- An appreciation for when followers should be encouraged to take the lead, and leaders encouraged to support and follow those they lead;
- An appreciation that AI and AL are just two methods amongst many, and a one-size-fits-all approach can lead to the opposite effect. Mindset is more important than common methodologies.

For this to work a wider appreciation of leadership can help. Moving a mindset about leadership beyond being done by leaders downwards (traditional Leadership 1.0) to being done by all sideways (Leadership 2.0), by followers upwards (Leadership 3.0) and towards a dynamic (all three – Leadership 4.0). Within such a mindset the use of positive Appreciative Inquiry and the elements of Appreciative Leadership become a natural result and output rather than a forced or trained input.



3 Questions to ask:

- How can we help employees appreciate the VUCA context we are in, instead of seeing it as a problem to be solved?
- How can we help leaders deal better with stress and pressure besides requiring them to show appreciation to their people?
- What different impact will result when we involve the whole organisation in solving problems instead of cascade and compliance?