

EDDE 804 Assignment #1: Leadership theory: Assessment, comparison and application

Appreciative Leadership: A Cure for Today's Leadership Crisis

Jason A. Openo

Athabasca University

There is a leadership crisis. Kellerman (2012) suggests “leadership is in danger of becoming obsolete” (p. 200) because of dominant cultural constructions of leadership. These constructs, promoted by the leadership industry, include that the wider world only matters insofar as it pertains to the narrow world, and this insular leadership focuses solely on financial performance, disregarding any external damage caused. According to Kellerman, leadership education programs assume leadership can be taught quickly and easily, and that it can be taught in silos with a curriculum that concentrates only on what is applicable. Followership is unimportant, bad leadership is unimportant, and not enough attention is paid to slowly changing patterns of dominance (pp. 191-195).

Gronn (2003) also suggests conventional constructs of leadership “are in trouble” (p. 23) due to the oversimplified leader-follower binary. Avolio, Walumba and Weber (2009) add a growing sense that historical models of leadership are not relevant to today’s digital/knowledge economy. The greatest indication of the leadership crisis, however, is that leadership theories and leadership development programs have not enabled leaders to do what leaders need to do. If the essence of leadership is influencing change (Uhl-Bien, 2003), and “80 percent of organizational change initiatives fail to meet their objectives” (Black, 2014, p. 3), conventional constructs of leadership are ineffective.

Kellerman (2012) suggests a perfect world would contain an overarching leadership theory with application to leadership practice (p. 195). Appreciative Leadership may provide that. Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader (2010) define Appreciative Leadership as

a way of being and a set of strategies that give rise to practices applicable across industries, sectors, and arenas of collaborative action. . . 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 (p. 3).

Gronn (2003) suggests that to study leadership, one should investigate the outcomes of workplace practices and then work backwards. This can be accomplished by examining examples where appreciative practices have been employed.

Appreciative Leadership arises from Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which possesses a growing research base. In an integrative review of eight research studies using AI methodology in nursing settings, Watkins, Dewar and Kennedy (2016) found that in all studies, Appreciative Inquiry was an inclusive and democratic process, providing “a refreshing contrast from hierarchical change management and education frameworks,” that AI demonstrated utility as a research and process improvement methodology, and in using AI there was “trust, dialogue, teamwork and the eradication of mistrust” (p. 187). Bonham (2011) found AI to be useful working with detained youth because AI does not “pathologize” patients and “provides the possibility aspect, which is therapeutic in anticipating that things will get better.” Mather and Konkle (2013) suggest appreciative development approaches in high poverty communities emphasize change within individuals and communities through a holistic view of relationships as a method to improve the quality of life and lead systemic change.

Appreciative practices build “psychological capital” by meeting basic psychological needs (Verleysen, Lambrechts & van Acker, 2015). In their comparative quantitative study of individuals in AI organizations and non-AI organizations, AI organizations scored significantly higher on optimism, resilience, hope and self-efficacy. Verleysen et al., conclude AI “deeply satisfies the basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness” (p. 28). By meeting the needs of individuals within organizations, those individuals become better

positioned to meet the needs of the organization. In one often cited study of AI in organizational development, Bushe and Kassam's (2005) meta-analysis found seven of 20 organizations achieved transformational outcomes using AI. They offer that AI's success resides in its ability to create a collective sense of what needs to be achieved with new models of how to achieve that by aligning practices with the inherent motivation people already have in relation to their organizational life.

These outcomes demonstrate that appreciative practices can have a profoundly positive effect. Working backward to the leader, the application of Appreciative Leadership holds significant promise for leaders in education. Appreciative Leaders tend to have four things in common:

- They are willing to engage with other members of their organization or community to create a better way of doing business or living.
- They are willing to learn and to change.
- They truly believe in the power of the positive, and
- They care about people, often describing the work of their organization in terms of helping people learn, grow, and develop (Whitney, et al., pp. xvii – xix).

Appreciative Leadership is rooted in positive psychology, but it is not used to “accelerate the development” of leaders, (Avolio, et al, 2009, p. 423). Kellerman (2012) warns that quick fixes underpin the leadership crisis, and so do Whitney, et al. (2010, p. 197); “The first and most essential way you will make a positive difference is by cultivating your character. By practicing Appreciative Leadership, you will become a better person and leader of unquestionable integrity.” Appreciative Leadership is a practice. Half of this discipline is the holistic cultivation of self, including cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, seeing the inherent

positive in a person or situation, physical well-being, financial savvy, actively supporting human activities that care for all living beings, and seeing the world and oneself through a God-or-spirit centered lens. Cultivating self-awareness, self-development, and mindfulness are not achieved quickly. “It takes courage, dedication, patience, and support to explore, learn about, and develop yourself” (Whitney, et al., 2010, pp. 198-199).

The other half of the Appreciative Leadership discipline is liberating others’ potential. “Appreciative Leadership holds all people in positive regard. Appreciative leaders are coaches and facilitators dedicated to helping others be the best they can be” (Whitney, et al, 2010, p. 199). Appreciative Leadership recognizes the primary importance of relationship development in a broader sense. “Relationships are at the heart of leadership and its capacity to make things happen” (Whitney, et al., 2010, p. 4), which is congruent with Uhl-Bien’s (2003) observation that relational perspectives “are at the forefront of emerging leadership thrusts” (p. 163).

A key practice of Appreciative Leaders is asking positively powerful questions. Collins (2009) contrasts the dynamics of leadership teams on-the-way-down versus leadership teams-on-the-way-up. Teams on-the-way-up possess a high questions-to-statements ratio (p. 77). Successful leadership teams ask questions, and Appreciative Leaders ask the questions that matter most, which are “those that are learning oriented – questions that challenge our assumptions, affirm each other’s strengths and gifts, help us reflect on past successful experience, foster creativity and innovation, and stimulate curiosity and excitement” (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, p. 1). Appreciative questions, such as, “If you had three wishes for this college, what would they be?” can unleash creative potential because they ground people in past success, connect people to their values, and activate their imagination.

Appreciative leaders recognize that “people’s strengths, capabilities, needs, wants, hopes and dreams are a readily abundant yet frequently overlooked source of positive power” (Whitney, et al., p. 58). Illuminating the best in others can be done through strengths-spotting, appreciative coaching, and creating a positive emotional environment. “Traditional leadership practices encourage recognition and appreciation for a job well done after the fact. Appreciative Leadership liberates positive power by recognizing people first” (Whitney, et al., p. 83). The investment in valuing people first, not as a result of their achievement, is reflective of Appreciative Inquiry’s belief that “the most important resources we have for generating constructive organizational change or improvements are our collective imagination and our discourse about the future” (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, p. 6). Appreciative Leaders do not possess the sole responsibility to provide vision; the vision is built collectively through inclusion. Inclusion, “consciously engaging with people to cocreate the future – is a foundational strategy for Appreciative Leadership” (Whitney, et al, p. 88), and everyone in the organization is provided an opportunity to raise their voice in the creation of a better world (Salopek, 2006).

Appreciative Leadership integrates the best components of many leadership theories and discards the less useful, like Leadership-Member Exchange Theory’s heavy focus on the vertical dyadic relationship (Northouse, 2007). Appreciative Leadership has strong kinship with transformational leadership’s “concern with improving the performance and developing their followers to the fullest potential” (Northouse, 2007, p. 181). Appreciative Leadership integrates elements of complexity leadership, where “leadership is viewed as an interactive system of dynamic, unpredictable agents that interact with each other in complex feedback networks” (Avolio, et al, 2009, p. 43). Cockell and MacArthur Blair (2012) suggest the appreciative mindset of “emergent design” allows processes to be cyclical and dynamic as ideas unfold.

Cockell and MacArthur-Blair are also evolving a Critical Appreciative Inquiry process model to recognize the impact of difference, power, and diversity for those inquiries where social justice is a critical component. And Bushe and Kassam (2005) suggest that leaders should abandon planned change efforts and take a more improvisational approach, further recognizing that leadership is an emergent phenomenon (Avolio, et al., 2009)

As Lewis observes, “the major challenge to institutional managers is to bring about change in an environment currently characterized by low trust and low energy” (1998, as cited in Latchem & Hanna, 2001, p. 43). To successfully initiate and execute change, people need to perceive change is in their best interest, that it will have positive meaning for them, and they must be able to visualize the change with their imagination (Latchem & Hanna, 2001).

Appreciative Leadership recognizes these unchangeable laws of change, and addresses them by encouraging leadership to exist at all levels and in all positions of an organization. It recognizes that people move in the direction of the what they study, and that leaders should put forth more questions than prescriptions. It seeks the best in people and in situations by using life affirming approaches in support of human well-being and organizational well-being (Whitney, et al, 2010). By offering an integrated leadership more substantial than what is offered by the leadership industry. Appreciative Leadership may hold the key for resolving the leadership crisis.

References

- Avolio, B., Walumbwa, F., & Weber, T.J. (2009). *Leadership: Current theories, research, and future directions*. Management Department Faculty Publications. Paper 37.
- Black, J. S. (2014). *It starts with one: Changing individuals changes organizations*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Bonham, E. (2011). Appreciative Inquiry in Youthful Offender Psychiatric Nursing Research. *Journal Of Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 24(2), 122-129. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6171.2011.00277.x
- Bushe, G., Kassam, A. (2005). When is appreciative inquiry transformational? A meta-case analysis. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 41 (2). 161-181. Retrieved from <http://www.gervasebushe.ca/ai-meta.pdf>
- Cockell, J., & McArthur-Blair, J. (2012). *Appreciative inquiry in higher education: A transformative force*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint.
- Collins, J. C. (2009). *How the mighty fall: And why some companies never give in*. New York: Jim Collins.
- Gronn, P. (2003). Leadership's place in a community of practice. In M. Brundrett, N. Burton, & R. Smith, (Eds.), *Leadership in education* (pp. 23- 35). London, GBR: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Kellerman, B. (2012). *The end of leadership*. New York: Harper Business.
- Latchem, C., & Hanna, D. E., Eds. (2001). *Leadership for 21st century learning: Global perspectives from educational innovators*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- Mather, Peter C., and Erin Konkle. "Promoting social justice through appreciative community service." *New Directions for Student Services* 2013, no. 143 (Fall2013 2013): 77-88. *Education Research Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 2, 2017).
- Northouse, P. G. (2004). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage
- Preskill, H. S., & Catsambas, T. T. (2006). *Reframing evaluation through appreciative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.
- Salopek, J. J. (2006). Appreciative inquiry at 20: Questioning David Cooperrider. *T+D*, 60(8), 21-22.
- Uhl-Bien, M. (2003). Relationship development as a key ingredient for leadership development. In S. Murphy & R. Riggio (Eds.), *The future of leadership development*, pp. 129-147. Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc Inc., Publishers.

Verleysen, B., Lambrechts, F., & Van Acker, F. (2015). Building psychological capital with appreciative inquiry: Investigating the mediating role of basic psychological need satisfaction. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *51*(1), 10-35.

Watkins, S., Dewar, B., & Kennedy, C. (2016). Appreciative Inquiry as an intervention to change nursing practice in in-patient settings: An integrative review. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 60179-190. doi:10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2016.04.017

Whitney, D. K., Trosten-Bloom, A., & Rader, K. (2010). *Appreciative leadership: Focus on what works to drive winning performance and build a thriving organization*. New York: McGraw-Hill.