

The Appreciative Leader

And Appreciative Change Processes

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*What do those managers
who bring out the best in
others do that makes them
so successful at managing
people?*

In traditional organizations many managers see themselves as “problem-solvers”. Authority to act on problems rests in the hands of the few, while the many are there to gather information, make suggestions and execute the “solutions” arrived at by the few. The best problem-solvers are promoted up the hierarchy and in many organizations “management” is synonymous with “problem-solving”. Management schools have been, I think, justly criticized for training MBAs mainly in how to apply problem-solving formulas. There are a number of deficiencies with the “manager as problem-solver” model that is contributing to the demise of command and control forms of organizing. One is that such organizations make sub-optimal use of their biggest operating expense, their payroll. Instead of using the minds of everyone to achieve and sustain competitive performance, most people are used as the hands and feet of the organization while only a comparative few are used for their brains. This separation of problem-solvers from solution implementers creates a number of other problems. One is increased resistance to implementation from those who have had no say in the “solutions”. “Those who plan the battle don’t battle the plan” as the saying goes. Another is that the “problem solvers” tend to be a few steps removed from the actual problems they are solving. Research has shown that solutions tend to be more efficient and more effective the more “variance is controlled at source” – that is, the more people close to problems are the ones solving the problems. Finally the separation of those who report problems and then execute solutions from those who actually solve the problems considerably slows down processes of adaptation and innovation. In today’s rapidly changing business environment this traditional form of leadership takes too long to find the right solutions and get them implemented.

These are some of the very reasons that new, “empowered” organizations are being created. These organizations “flatten the hierarchy” precisely so those solving problems and making decisions are close to where the problems are. In theory, everyone is a problem-solver and local adaptations to local problems occur rapidly. In practice, however, these new organizational designs are still often managed with traditional leadership styles so the results are far below what they are when people are using the skills of *Clear Leadership*.¹

These managers do a lot less problem-solving than traditional managers. They rely on the people doing the work to solve problems. Instead of focusing on problems, they focus on solutions. They are continually looking for instances where things are going right; where quality is increasing, where customers are being satisfied, where internal processes are being managed seamlessly and where wealth is being created. They get clear about where things are working well and when they find it they work to “amplify it”. By that, I mean that they work at increasing what is already working well. Instead of trying to compensate for weakness, they build on strength. Instead of criticizing and punishing people for their failures, they praise and reward people for their successes. Instead of worrying about what to do with the processes or people that aren’t working well, taking what is working well (and the bulk of the workforce) for granted, they wonder about what to do with the processes and people that are working well. By managing people through appreciative processes, they use less energy to have a much greater, positive impact on people’s motivation and organizational performance. I call this set of behaviors Appreciative Leadership.

¹ G.R. Bushe (2001) *Clear Leadership*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing.

We Get More Of Whatever We Pay Attention To

There is an ancient piece of wisdom that whatever we pay attention to grows. It's as though simply paying attention to something invests it with more energy. The Appreciative Leader chooses to pay attention to things he values, cares about, is happy with and wants more of. This means, first of all, being clear about what you want more of. Sometimes that is easy and sometimes it isn't. People often begin by knowing what they want less of, especially from other people. "I want her to stop gossiping", "I want him to stop interrupting me when I talk", "I want them to stop filing nuisance grievances". OK, but what do you want more of? You cannot use Appreciative Leadership to stop something, not directly. Appreciative processes are used to amplify things – to create social reality by increasing the amount or frequency of something you want more of.

Secondly, for it to be a truly appreciative mind-set, you need to be calling to something that touches people's imagination, their aspirations and spirit. You may want one more widget produced but that, in itself, isn't going to touch the hearts and minds of anyone. Opportunities to excel, make a difference, grow and develop, achieve our potential, be the best, live in community, make a better world, fulfill our dreams, gain new hope, surpass expectations, be a winner, enable the children, ennoble our spirit, be a part of a dynamic and caring team, be in real partnership with others, make a valued contribution; these are the kinds of things that an Appreciative Leader pays attention to.

Jerry, a manager who was trying to develop Appreciative Leadership found himself stumped over a "problem person" who worked for him. Bernice had been in her job before he arrived and was protected by the union she belonged to. Jerry found her obnoxious and intimidating with a minimal work ethic and believed that she poisoned the whole atmosphere in the office. His attempts to give Bernice

"corrective feedback" had met with sullen silence and no change in her "attitude". He found himself stumped over what he wanted "more of" from Bernice. He tried out different ideas with me; "I want her to be nicer" - what's nicer I asked. He described what she would stop doing if she were nicer. "I want her to just do her job". "Does she do her job now?", I asked. Well, yes. "Actually she really knows her job but just doesn't care. That's it, I want her to care more". "What would it look like if she cared more?", but all he could come up with is things she would stop doing if she cared more. "You're going to have to work harder at figuring out what it is you want to see in her", I said.

Jerry was still trying to figure this out when, a few days later, he was in a meeting with his Regional Manager and his staff, including Bernice. His manager was describing a new service that they would begin to offer customers and his belief that they needed to transfer someone from another office with expertise to provide the service. Jerry said, "We don't need someone else, Bernice knows more about that than anyone we could transfer. Don't you Bernice?". Bernice did not change her sullen expression but nodded her head and the Regional Manager said, "OK, we'll start out with Bernice but if you feel you need more support on this let me know" and the meeting concluded.

An hour later Bernice came back into Jerry's office with a list of ideas for how to launch the new service. Jerry was stunned; she had never taken initiative on anything before. Working at being an Appreciative Leader, he now started to see the part of Bernice that wanted to be recognized as the best, as making a valued contribution, and began tracking and fanning that part of her at every opportunity. Two weeks later when I saw Jerry he was buoyant at the change in Bernice. "She's still uses coarse language and makes fun of me but I have to say that she has really turned around in terms of her work. She actually stayed late at the office last week and other people are noticing it too". Jerry hadn't realized what he was doing when he praised Bernice in front of his boss and her peers but he had the wherewithal to quickly capitalize on it because he was working on developing an appreciative mind set.

Appreciative Change Processes

Traditional approaches to change management utilize a problem-solving approach to change, focusing on defining problems, setting targets, planning strategies and overcoming roadblocks. While such processes are obviously useful and important, they have a number of unappealing consequences:

- ❶ People spend most of their time focusing on what is not working well. They can only do this for so long without becoming demoralized and resigned to a problem filled workplace.
- ❷ Data collection consists of having people discuss, and often display to others, their failings. This is only experienced as useful when there is hope that doing so will lead to improvement. After a number of experiences where little was done to improve the situation, people become naturally less enthusiastic with "sharing" their problems and concerns. It becomes more difficult to get accurate information.
- ❸ Most people recognize that if you constantly criticize children, they will develop an inferiority complex. The same is true for organizations. An organization with an inferiority complex has a subtle, unconscious air of disempowerment. People will avoid risks in fear of failure.
- ❹ Addressing problems, setting targets and working to accomplish them creates a culture of problem-centred improvement. The only time people search for improvements is when a problem is defined. This makes development of a culture of continuous improvement very difficult.

Appreciative change processes, or more simply, Appreciative Process, overcomes these side-effects by taking a different perspective to driving change. Instead of trying to fix what's broken, appreciative process improves systems by amplifying what is working. Appreciative change processes engage the people who need to be part of improving the organization in identifying the best of what they do, celebrating and learning from it, working with people's intrinsic motivation to be competent, do their best and be successful.

Understanding the power of Appreciative Process depends on a perspective enunciated half a century ago by the creator of statistical quality control, Edward Demmings. His powerful insight was that its not people, it's the system that creates the majority of an organization's outcomes. Too often we equate success and failure with the people, assuming that things like great customer service, efficient manufacturing, productive sales, and so on, are the result of great people and that the opposite is also true – that poor performance is a function of poor performing people.

People do make a difference, but as Demmings showed, they make only a small difference compared to the difference processes make. Great processes make great workers, and lousy processes

produce poor performers. Applying Demming's insights allowed Japanese manufacturers to wipe out western home electronics and optical industries and gain a huge foothold in the automobile market.

Using Appreciative Process requires the skills and mind-set of the Appreciative Leader, bringing out the best in people. Appreciative Leaders amplify the parts in others that want to succeed, want to make a contribution, want to achieve, want to be part of a dynamic team, want to provide for their families in a way they can take pride in and all the rest of the common virtues that are basic to human nature. But Appreciative Processes take those skills to a new level by applying them to systemic change, engaging groups of people in creating a climate of continuous improvement by building off the best of what already is.

Jason was the VP for World Wide Customer Service of a specialty appliance manufacturer. The company was growing in leaps and bounds due to a good product and a great corporate culture but as the company grew the pains associated with growth were being felt. He, along with the rest of the senior management team, felt pretty deflated when the market research firm they had hired to asses their customer satisfaction told them that on a customer loyalty measure they rated a 3 out of 100, when the industry average was 25 and best in class was 45. The consultants offered to follow up with

another study to figure out why their customers had so little loyalty but David decided to take an appreciative process approach. He knew that one area where there was a tremendous demand for customer service was in phone support for the specialized software this appliance used so he decided to begin an experiment there. He asked the phone support staff, after completing every customer phone call, to ask the customers if they would be willing to take a couple of minutes to answer a few questions. Many were. The first question customers were asked was “What do you really like about our product?”. The second question was “What are the best aspects of our customer support?” and the last question was “We’d like to provide you the best customer support experience possible. What could we do to accomplish that?”

As the information the phone support workers collected was analyzed by the management team basic themes in what the company did well and what people really wanted quickly surfaced and this was useful in itself. But more profound was the impact that asking these questions had on the customer support staff itself. Instead of always being on the wrong end of complaints, the staff got to hear about what was great about them and about their product. Stories of exceptional customer support got passed around and these not only increased everyone’s pride in what they did and general job satisfaction but raised expectations for themselves and each other. 18 months later when another external assessment was done customer support stood out as the one area of the company that was near or at best in class in customer perceptions.

Figuring out what you want more of, gathering data and analyzing it is not that difficult. It’s the amplification strategies that make all the difference

in using appreciative process. In the story above, amplification was created in a number of different ways. For one, it was the front line employees, the ones ultimately responsible for customer satisfaction, that were collecting the information – not some external research outfit. Engaging the people who’ll be responsible for making changes to systems seems to be a basic part of appreciative process. But the Appreciative Leader has a number of tricks and tools that sidestep the typical problems of “resistance to change”, “change fatigue” and cynicism. Perhaps you can recognize a few that Jason used.

All in all, the skills of the Appreciative Leader and the technique of appreciative process are fairly simple – they are easy to explain and demonstrate and most people intuitively understand their power. Living these attitudes and skills however, is much tougher. Learning to develop an appreciative mind-set and see the opportunities for using appreciative processes requires letting go of a life-time of looking for problems, seeing what’s missing and paying attention to the gap. We are all heirs to a deficit mind-set; it is part of current western culture. To make this change requires time, effort and coaching. And it requires a collective effort to redefine the leadership culture of the organization toward a more appreciative stance – a culture where you build on strength, celebrate success and leverage what you already do well to create a culture that supports learning and performing at the highest levels.

***For more information on the Appreciative Leadership and Change course
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