



## LEADERSHIP: AN APPRECIATIVE VIEW

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IS BOTH A PHILOSOPHY AND A PROCESS FOR CREATING CHANGE

BY LIA BOSCH

*Joe Smith, Marketing Director of a multinational company, attends a company-sponsored leadership development program. As part of this intensive program, Joe's colleagues provide feedback on his leadership capability through a 360 degree instrument. As he reviews the responses completed by his colleagues, Joe is pleasantly surprised, puzzled and upset*

*at the same time. Joe can't understand how the responses can be so different in some cases. Why do two respondents say that he's abrasive, while two others say he's not? Why does one person encourage him to be more firm and direct, while another wants him to be more sensitive in his communications?*

Most of us as leaders can relate to Joe Smith's experience. Hearing what others think of how we lead can be either an intimidating or re-affirming experience – or both at the same time! As both a leadership coach and experienced business manager, I have learned over the years that leadership is a personal experience that varies depending on the characters involved. Furthermore, leadership is not just about the person who leads but about the relationship and expectations co-constructed by the leader and follower. Given this view, one can understand why the feedback leaders receive can sometimes be contradictory and why the development of leadership must break out of a one-size-fits-all approach to a more personalized journey.

Formed by both experience and study, my perspective on leadership is founded upon the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) philosophy. This article provides a brief summary of the principles of AI in the context of leadership and proposes that dialogue and discovery about leadership expectations is an effective way to understand and enhance leadership capability.

#### AI AND LEADERSHIP

Generally, Appreciative Inquiry is both a philosophy and a process for creating change. As opposed to problem solving that looks at the root of problems to identify courses for correction, AI looks at the root of successes to discover underlying conditions that should be employed going forward. For example, rather than asking about what a leader is doing wrong in delegating to others, an AI

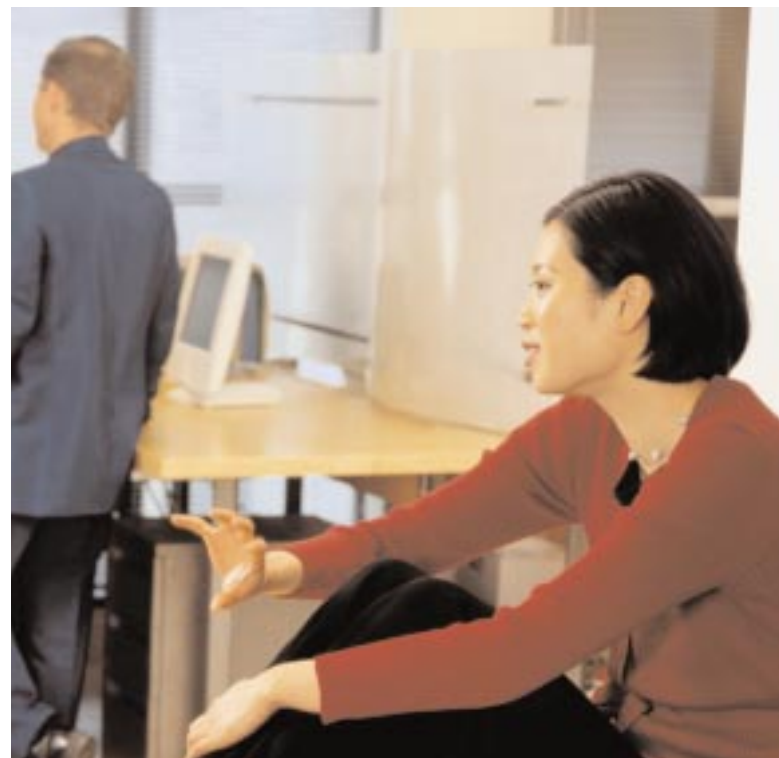
approach asks about what a leader does to delegate effectively. These questions form the basis for enhancing a leader's ongoing and future behaviors, i.e. building on top of a solid foundation.

Appreciative Inquiry originates from social construction theory and from positive imagery research in a number of fields such as medicine, anthropology, behavioral psychology, and education. The five key principles of AI, in the context of leadership, are described below:

#### CONSTRUCTIONIST PRINCIPLE

*"We are who we think we are and who others think we are."*

Reality is created through social interactions. My essence as a leader is formed based on my personal beliefs and previous experience. For example, my actions as a leader reflect what I believe to be effective behaviors that leaders demonstrate – either from personal observation/experience in the past or from belief of what is appropriate. In addition, the beliefs and experiences about leadership held by followers influence my leadership. The way followers act and react to my behaviors influence how I act and respond. Together, we create a set of expectations about leadership that form the basis of the relationship. For instance, if a follower believes that leaders should exert strong control, he may act in such a way to relinquish control over to the leader. Based on his beliefs, the leader, in response, may either welcome that control or try to empower the follower to exert more control. The outcome depends on the expectations of and interaction between the two individuals.



# LEADERSHIP

**is a personal experience that varies depending on the characters involved...**



## SIMULTANEITY PRINCIPLE

*“For every action as a leader, there is a reaction as a follower.”*

There have been times in my life that years down the road I've reconnected with people who have said to me, “Do you remember when you said to me....Well, that influenced my decision to ....” Frankly, many times I don't remember what I said. The moment they remember was not memorable for me. As leaders, we often think that we have less influence on others than we really do. Everyday what we do, say or don't do or don't say impact others in ways that are not visible to us. For example, as leaders when we simply attend a meeting to 'observe' rather than 'participate,' we are influencing that meeting. Our mere attendance changes the dynamics of the interactions. The questions we ask or statements we make affect the outcomes and shape the thinking of others, just like the questions and statements of others shape our thinking.

## ANTICIPATORY PRINCIPLE

*“What we believe to be true will most likely result.”*

In today's society, we have created many systems for categorizing and measuring things and people. For example, in organizations we have performance management systems that rate people's performance and 360 degree programs to assess leadership capability against a standard. The results from these systems can either help or hinder us given that our expectations of others have a bearing on how we act towards others. And, our actions impact their reactions. As a result, when our systems tell us that people are less-than-expected performers, as leaders we may reinforce that performance in others by acting in such a way towards them that results in

less-than-expected performance. Of course, these systems can also help by creating a 'halo effect' around certain individuals. For example, how many times have you heard others in your organization make statements such as, “Well, we expected that from Charlie. He's always been able to pull things off at the last minute...!”

## POETIC PRINCIPLE

*“There are always three sides to a story: my side, your side, and the truth.”*

Reinforcing the constructive principle, the poetic principle simply means that our personal perspectives color the way we see things. Just as a poem could be read in different ways, as leaders our interpretation of situations is determined by our particular perspective. Hearing the different perspectives of people on a particular issue can help us understand that there is no 'one' reality, thus giving us greater empathy and flexibility as we lead and follow.

## POSITIVE PRINCIPLE

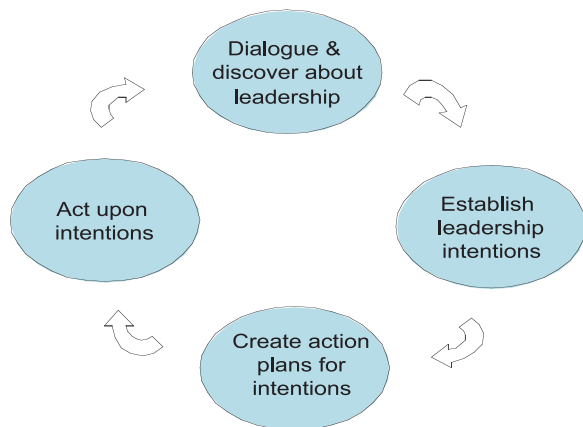
*“Tell me what I'm doing well and I'll be filled with pride; tell me what I'm doing wrong and I'll run and hide.”*

Based on biological roots, the response humans have to the positive is similar to the response by plants to light – we turn towards it as we are energized by it. As a case in point, the teachers or leaders people remember are those who believed in them and inspired them to achieve beyond their own expectations. Those teachers or leaders see and reinforce the positives in others. In management theory, the positive principle is about positive reinforcement.

## A LEADER'S JOURNEY

What does seeing leadership through the appreciative lens mean for assessing and developing leaders? The appreciative view suggests that there is no 'one' best leadership profile or standard. Rather, leadership is a personal experience that is created and recreated by individuals interacting in a particular context. In addition, leadership is in the eye of the beholder.

In this framework, the development of leadership is akin to a journey of dialogue and discovery to create and re-create oneself as a leader. Through this journey, leaders with the help of followers surface and understand expectations of leadership; leaders articulate their 'intentions' about leadership; establish ways to live up to those intentions; and act upon them. The journey continues by re-dialoguing and re-discovering about their actions and expectations. See chart below for a visual view of this process:



The leadership journey framework germinated from a study I conducted with two colleagues in 2001 to learn about the experiences of diverse people with good leadership. Using an appreciative approach, we interviewed 30 people of different occupations, ages, genders, and races in North America. Although we conducted the study with a diverse group of people, the framework can be used within a single organization or team situation.

The interview questions used in the study, listed in Table 1, can be modified for use in a more personalized leadership journey. For instance, the first question a leader could ask is, "Tell me about a time when I've demonstrated good leadership?"

TABLE 1

### Leadership Study - Interview Questions

1. Tell me about a time when you saw someone, you yourself practiced, or you were influenced by good leadership?
  - What happened?
  - What are some of the key things you remember about this experience?
  - Why did you choose this example?
2. How did it affect the community/team/company in a positive way? How did it affect you?
3. In order to affect the future in a positive way, what trait, ability, skill, and/or characteristic do you want a leader to have?

For the study, after analyzing the content from interviews, we derived a list of five themes or factors that described good leadership for the people interviewed. The factors, listed in Table 2, are used for articulating leadership intentions that reflect what is desired individually and collectively by people involved.

TABLE 2

### Five Factors of Good Leadership

1. Integrity
2. Demonstrate and 'live' respect for others
3. Confidence in self and one's beliefs
4. Passion and the ability to communicate that passion
5. Commitment to action

Leadership intentions state in provocative and affirmative terms what leaders do, what they value, how they interact and relate to others, and what they believe. They are the cornerstone for the leader's development plan and become the foundation for action planning.

To ensure success, leaders must also find ways to understand, adapt, influence, change organizational infrastructure, relationships and processes to support their development.

Overall, the appreciative leadership journey is about acting upon leadership intentions, dialoguing, reflecting, and re-acting. The journey continues as the leader redefines intentions through dialogue, reflection, and re-action.

Lia Bosch, MSOD, is a Leadership Coach and OD Consultant with over 20 years of business and management experience. She has authored several articles on leadership, Appreciative Inquiry, and other organizational issues. ■