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The Application of Appreciative Perspectives To the Coaching Enterprise

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The Application of Appreciative Perspectives To the Coaching Enterprise

WILLIAM BERGQUIST, PH.D.

Appreciative inquiry has arrived! This term and the underlying concepts and attitudes associated with this term are flourishing in the fields of organizational development and organizational consultation. The term appreciative inquiry has even been abbreviated. Organizational consultants who are in the know now simply call it AI. This seems to be a sign that this organizational change strategy is now fully admitted to the club. There is an important difference, however, between AI and many of the other concepts of leadership and management that have passed like a forgettable breeze across the organizational landscape. AI has real substance. It offers great promise as a vehicle for shifting attitudes and as a way of informing and transforming organizational processes. There is much to appreciate in the progress made to date in the field of appreciative inquiry. Yet, more must be done if the full potential of AI is to be realized. Bergquist identifies ways in which AI can be expanded and, in particular, ways in which AI can be incorporated in a masterful organizational coaching strategy.

EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF AI

Structural strategies are needed to complement the current process-oriented and attitude-oriented strategies of Appreciative Inquiry (Bergquist, 2003). Furthermore, appreciative strategies can be effectively used by organizational coaches to both enhance the work being done by these coaches and expand the use and perspective of Appreciative Inquiry (Bergquist, Merritt & Phillips, 1999, 2004).

A remarkable organizational consultant and educational visionary, Goodwin Watson, suggested many years ago that effective and enduring organizational change requires more than just a shift in process or attitude. Watson suggested that all organizations are constituted of three dynamics: process, structure and attitude (Watson & Johnson, 1972). These are not priority steps in a systemic intervention strategy, but instead function as interdependent leverage points for systemic organizational change and/or improvement. These three strategy points are understood as follows:

➢ **Structure** is all of those organizationally defined parameters and connections within and through which persons and processes in an organization carry out the purpose of the organization. It is the formal and dynamic architecture defined by the organization within which the mission of the organization is carried out.

➢ **Process** is inclusive of functions and activities that are integral to achieving the results of an organization. It concerns the day-to-day interaction among those who work in and for the organization.

➢ **Attitude** is the individual and corporate mental and emotional landscape upon which decisions about the organization and its process are navigated. It concerns the foundational culture of the organization, as well as the assumptions, beliefs, values and personal aspirations that animate and guide those engaged in the activities of the organization.

Watson proposes that all three of these strategic points must be engaged if organizational change and improvement are to be sustained. Leaders of an organization that introduce structural change, such as a re-engineered manufacturing procedure or a new employee compensation plan, will likely find it very difficult to sustain this structural change.

They need the complementary changes in process (how people work in this new structure) and attitude (how people feel about working in this new structure with new processes). Similarly, process changes and changes in attitude are insufficient if the structures of the organization are incompatible with these processes and attitudes. Some change agents argue for a shift in heart (attitude), while others call for training and education (process).

Yet others advocate for legal changes (structure) or for changes in the organization chart (structure). Watson believes that structural changes are often very seductive because they require no more than the stroke of a pen or brute enforcement. Structural change, however, is often ineffective, or even counterproductive and destructive, when not accompanied by changes in process and attitude. Watson was prophetic in the 1950s when he declared that school desegregation (structural change) would be destructive and, ultimately, unsuccessful, if it was not accompanied by changes in process and attitudes. Desegregation would only work if it was accompanied by programs that assisted the teachers in working with an integrated classroom (process change) and that prepared citizens for a shifting perspective regarding educational quality, governmental control and the civil rights that are inherent in citizenship (attitude change).

At the present time, appreciative inquiry primarily concerns organizational processes and attitudes. This focus on process and attitude is commendable, given the all too frequent focus in contemporary organizations on structural change. Structural strategies, however, must be identified if the practitioners of appreciative inquiry are to take the next step.

We can learn much from Goodwin Watson when considering ways in which the organizational benefits associated with appreciative inquiry can be sustained. At the present time, appreciative inquiry primarily concerns organizational processes and attitudes. This focus on process and attitude is commendable, given the all too frequent focus in contemporary organizations on structural change. Structural strategies, however, must be identified if the practitioners of appreciative inquiry are to take the next step. We can begin this process of expanding the concept of AI by looking at several different ways in which the processes and attitudes of appreciation have been described up to the present time. While much has been written over the past decade about the specific techniques of appreciative inquiry, I still value the earlier, more tentative and thought-provoking concepts offered at the point in time when the appreciative perspective was first being considered (Srivastva, Cooperrider & Associates, 1990). Therefore, I will anchor my brief description of appreciative processes and attitudes in these early formulations.

THE PROCESSES OF APPRECIATION

These are three ways in which the term *appreciation* is commonly used. They are each related to the processes of appreciation. We appreciate other people through attempting to understand them. We also appreciate other people through valuing them and often seeing them in a new light. A third way of appreciating another person is by being thoughtful and considerate in acknowledging their contributions to the organization.

Understanding Another Person

Fundamentally, the process of appreciation refers to efforts made to gain a clearer understanding of another person's perspective. We come to appreciate the point of view being offered by our colleagues or the situation in which other people find themselves. This appreciation, in turn, comes not from detached observation, but rather from direct engagement. One gains knowledge from an appreciative perspective by "identifying with the observed" (Harmon, 1990).

We grow to appreciate an organization by investing it with optimism.

Compassion, rather than objectivity, is critical. As appreciative managers, consultants, coaches or leaders, we care about the people and groups with whom we work. Neutrality is inappropriate in such a setting. Compassion, however, does not imply either a loss of discipline or a loss of boundaries between one's own perspective and the perspective held by the other person. *Appreciation is deeply caring about and caring for another person's problems, without personally taking on their problems.* We can appreciate another person's problems and assist this person in solving these problems without losing our personal identity.

Valuing Another Person

In some contexts, the process of appreciation refers to an increase in worth or value. A stock portfolio "appreciates" in value. This use of the term appreciation would seem, on the surface, to be economic in character. Value, however, can be assigned in non-financial terms. Van Gogh looked at a vase of sunflowers. He appreciated these flowers by rendering a painting of them. In doing so, he increased the aesthetic value of these flowers for everyone. Van Gogh similarly appreciated and brought new value to his friends through his friendship: "Van Gogh did not merely articulate admiration for his friend: He created new values and new ways of seeing the world through the very act of valuing" (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 123).

Peter Vaill recounts a scene from *Lawrence of Arabia* in which Lawrence tells a British colonel that his job at the Arab camp was to "appreciate the situation" (Vaill, 1990, p. 323). By appreciating the situation, Lawrence assessed and then added credibility to the Arab cause, much as a knowledgeable jeweler or art appraiser can increase the value of a diamond or painting through nothing more than the thoughtful appraisal. Lawrence's appreciation of the Arab situation, in turn, helped to produce a new level of courage and ambition on the part of the Arab communities with which Lawrence was associated. *Appreciative organizations create value, courage and ambition among those who are associated with the organization.* This is a key point in the process of organizational appreciation.

Recognizing the Contributions of Another Person

From yet another perspective, the process of appreciation concerns our recognition of the contributions that have been made by another person: "I appreciate the efforts you have made in getting this project started." Sometimes this sense of appreciation is reflected in the special recognition we give an administrator for a particularly successful project or in the bouquet of flowers we leave with our secretary on National Secretary's Day.

An appreciative culture is forged when an emphasis is placed on the realization of inherent potential and the uncovering of latent strengths, rather than on the identification of weaknesses or deficits.

While these occasional forms of recognition can be gratifying to those receiving the praise, appreciation can be exhibited in an even more constructive, ongoing manner through the daily interactions between a leader and his associates. *The consistent acknowledgment of contributions is embedded in mutual respect and it is founded on an appreciative attitude regarding the nature and purpose of work.* If the leader "sees work as the means whereby a person creates oneself (that is, one's identity and personality) and creates community (that is, social relations), then the accountability structure becomes one of nurturing and mentoring" (Cummings and Anton, 1990, p. 259).

THE ATTITUDES OF APPRECIATION

The term appreciation is now being used with regard to not only individuals but also organizational settings, and has become more closely aligned with shifts in organizational attitude. There are three ways in which the attitude of appreciation is exhibited in an organization. An organization is considered to be appreciative if one finds a positive image of the future within an organization, especially if this image infuses strategic planning in the organization with meaning and purpose. The organization is also appreciative if a concerted effort is being made to recognize the distinct strengths and potentials of people working within the organization. Finally, an organization is appreciative if its employees consistently value and seek to establish cooperative relationships and recognize the mutual benefits that can be derived from this cooperation.

Establishing a Positive Organizational Image of the Future

This use of the term appreciation relates both to individual attitudes and organizational climate. *Appreciative organizations lean into the future.* We grow to appreciate an organization by investing it with optimism.

In an appreciative organization there is a pervasive sense of hope about the future for this organization and the valuable role it can play in society. "Organization-wide affirmation of the positive future is the single most important act that a system can engage in if its real aim is to bring to fruition a new and better future" (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 119). Effective leaders, in such a setting, will be "not only concerned with what is but also with what might be" (Frost & Egri, 1990, p. 305). Employees come to appreciate their own role and that played by other members of the organization with regard to contributions that enable the organization to realize its purposes and values.

> *Paradoxically, at the point that people are fully appreciated and reaffirmed they tend to live up to their newly acclaimed talents and drive, just as they live down to their depreciated sense of self if constantly criticized or undervalued.*

Recognizing Distinctive Strengths and Competencies

Appreciation in an organizational setting also refers to recognition of the distinct strengths and potentials of individuals working within the organization. An appreciative culture is forged when an emphasis is placed on the realization of inherent potential and the uncovering of latent strengths, rather than on the identification of weaknesses or deficits. This is a critical attitudinal variable. People and organizations "do not need to be fixed. They need constant reaffirmation" (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 120).

Even in a context of competition, appreciative attitude transforms envy into learning and transforms personal achievement into a sense of overall purpose and value. The essayist, Roger Rosenblatt, reveals just such a process in candidly describing his sense of competition with other writers (Rosenblatt, 1997, p. 23). He suggests that his sense of admiration for the work of other writers serves a critical function in his own life:

> Part of the satisfaction in becoming an admirer of the competition is that it allows you to wonder how someone else did something well, so that you might imitate it—steal it, to be blunt. But the best part is that it shows you that there are things you will never learn to do, skills and tricks that are out of your range, an entire imagination that is out of your range. The news may be disappointing on a personal level, but in terms of the cosmos, it is strangely gratifying. One sits among the works of one's contemporaries as in a planetarium, head all the way back, eyes gazing up at heavenly matter that is all the more beautiful for being unreachable. Am I growing up?

Paradoxically, at the point that people are fully appreciated and reaffirmed they tend to live up to their newly acclaimed talents and drive, just as they *live down* to their depreciated sense of self if constantly criticized or undervalued. Carl Rogers suggested many years ago that people are least likely to change if they are being asked to change. *People are more likely to change when they have received positive regard.* Appreciation and positive regard certainly seem to be closely related concepts.

Recognizing the Value of Cooperation

A final mode of appreciation is evident in the attitude of cooperation in an organization. *An organization is appreciative when efforts are made to form cooperative relationships and recognize the mutual benefits that can be derived from this cooperation.* A culture of appreciation provides organizational integration. It is the glue that holds an organization together while the organization is growing and differentiating into distinctive units of responsibility (Durkheim, 1933; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969). The appreciative perspective is particularly important when there are significant differences in vision, values or other cultural elements among members of an organization or among independent organizations that seek to work together (Bergquist, Betwee, & Meuel, 1995). If genuine and productive cooperation is to take place, then appreciation must embrace both judgments about reality and judgments about value (Cummings, 1990, p. 210).

Those at the bottom of the hierarchy are forced to work harder and smarter, precisely because no one higher up in the organization has taken responsibility for the broader problem.

AN APPRECIATIVE APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL COACHING: MANAGING THE MONKEY

What about the application of AI to the field of organizational coaching? While there are many applications, I will focus on one, offering several suggestions specifically with regard to problem ownership in a coaching context. This application builds on the six definitions I just offered.

To solve a problem, someone must take responsibility for it. If the problem is particularly difficult to understand or solve, then no one may want to assume responsibility. Difficult problems are often ignored, for to acknowledge that the problem exists suggests that someone must solve it. At other times, difficult problems are directed upward in the organization, each employee looking to a boss for the answer. As president of the United States during the middle of the 20th Century, Harry Truman placed a sign on his desk stating that "the buck stops here." He recognized that difficult and (sometimes) seemingly irresolvable problems were often bumped up in the federal government until they reached the president's office. The president had nowhere to send these problems and hence had to solve them himself. Sometimes the ownership of problems moves down in an organization. Administrators shift blame for a problem from themselves to their subordinates, defining the problem as one of poor work habits or lack of motivation. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy are forced to work harder and smarter, precisely because no one higher up in the organization has taken responsibility for the broader problem.

The monkey often leaps from the shoulder of a client to the shoulder of her coach. A client enters a coaching session with the monkey on her shoulder and leaves with the monkey sitting on the shoulder of her coach.

The Leaping Monkey

There is yet another way that responsibility for problems gets reassigned. Managers

or supervisors who are faced with a difficult problem may be tempted to bring in an advisor, consultant or organizational coach in order to shift responsibility to this person. This shifting of responsibility usually is not conscious on the part of the person requesting advice or consultation. However, the manager or supervisor may leave the meeting with an advisor, consultant or coach feeling enormous relief. A burden has been lifted off the manager's shoulders and placed on the shoulders of someone else. I propose that this shift in responsibility is a shift in problem ownership. Metaphorically, we suggest that a problem can be thought of as a monkey (Oncken & Wass, 1974; Blanchard, Oncken, & Burrows, 1991). The monkey often leaps from the shoulder of a client to the shoulder of her coach. A client enters a coaching session with the monkey on her shoulder and leaves with the monkey sitting on the shoulder of her coach.

How Do I Know When a Monkey Is Present?

It's not hard to tell when a monkey is present. Most of the time, when we are asked for advice from a member of our family, a friend or a colleague, it's clear that this person has a monkey on their shoulder. People in our society typically do not ask for help unless they have a monkey, for we value self-sufficiency and competence. While some people create *false monkeys* in order to get the attention of other people, most would rather not admit they have a monkey that won't depart.

More concretely, we know that a monkey exists whenever another person tells us one or more of three things:
- *Things aren't what I would like them to be* [recognition that a problem exists].
- *I want to do something about this situation* [assumes some responsibility for problem and is motivated to seek solution to problem].
- *I don't know what to do about this situation* [lack of clarity about nature of problem and/or lack of an adequate solution].

When someone makes one or more of these three statements to us (in whatever words are appropriate), then we know that a monkey is sitting on that person's shoulder.

How Do I Know When the Monkey Lands on My Shoulder?

This is also rather easy to detect. You will know the monkey is moving to your shoulder:
- The moment you *focus more on the problem than on the person who is telling you about the problem* [you begin to lose track of what the person is saying, having begun to think about the problem and its solution].
- The moment you begin to *offer solutions to the problem while the person is still talking about the problem* [you are usually not testing to see if the person has a clear idea about the nature of the problem or if she has identified her own solution to this problem].
- The moment you begin to *worry about your own ability to solve the problem* [rather than focusing on the other person's ability to solve the problem].

Sometimes you are not aware that you have taken on the monkey until after the coaching session has concluded. You know that you have the monkey on your shoulder if you:
- Continue to worry about the problem long after the session is completed.
- Continue to worry about your ability to solve the problem long after the session is completed.

- Expect your colleague to check with you about the problem and about progress toward resolution of the problem. Your colleague may seek to gain your approval or permission regarding a certain action. You may grow resentful if you are left out of this process, even though it is not really your problem.
- Have responsibility for next step and realize that nothing is likely to happen unless you take some action and follow-up on any solutions generated regarding the problem.

If any of these conditions exist during or after work with a client, then the monkey probably can be found sitting quite securely (and heavily) on the shoulder of her organizational coach.

What's Wrong With Having a Monkey on My Shoulder?

There is nothing inherently wrong with monkeys in moderation. We accept a bit of a monkey on our shoulders whenever we offer help and support to a colleague for a problem that we have just helped identify. We assist our elderly parent as she prepares for an upcoming operation. We help our child prepare for a play at his school. We take over temporarily for a colleague when she is ill or overworked. Most of the time, however, it is inappropriate to take ownership for a problem that is not ours. It is particularly inappropriate to take ownership away from a colleague when they are seeking our assistance as an organizational coach.

A masterful and appreciative organizational coach knows when a monkey is present, when the monkey is threatening to leap on her shoulder, and when it is sometimes appropriate to accept this monkey and take at least partial responsibility for someone else's problem.

When we allow a monkey to leap to our shoulder, we have unduly and inappropriately burdened ourselves with someone else's problem (and reduced our capacity to address our own problems). Even more importantly, we have not been appreciative and we have eliminated the opportunity for this other person to learn how to solve this problem (or a similar problem) in the future. We build client dependency rather than client independence. We exhibit little appreciation for our client's own strengths. We assume a deficit perspective regarding our client: apparently our client is not capable of solving his own problem. We also increase the chances that our client in the future will once again attempt to move a monkey from his shoulder to our own. A masterful and appreciative organizational coach knows when a monkey is present, when the monkey is threatening to leap on her shoulder, and when it is sometimes appropriate to accept this monkey and take at least partial responsibility for someone else's problem.

Keeping the Monkey on Our Client's Shoulder
Through Advocacy-Inviting Inquiry

As a way of actively engaging with her client, while keeping the monkey off her own shoulder, a masterful organizational coach may engage the subtle processes of advocating in a manner that invites inquiry and dialogue with a client (Argryis & Schön, 1975, 1978; Argyris, 1989; Senge,1990). There is nothing wrong with advocating—giving advice, offering one's own experiences, providing an analogy or metaphor, or even offering a suggestion that is "off-the-mark" in an interesting way (see Table 1). The key to appreciative coaching is to follow this advocacy with an invitation to the client—an invitation for the client to offer her own reactions to the suggestion being

The coaching process has become truly appreciative when advocacy is complemented by a invitation to joint inquiry, for the coach and client are assuming that the answer resides not with the coach, but either with the client or as an emergent property of the co-created rich dialogue that follows the coach's advocacy.

offered. Rather than "easing in" with advice that is offered indirectly (through questions or by "beating around the bush"), the advice is offered directly and clearly. Furthermore, it is followed up with an exploration by both the client and coach of the strengths and weaknesses of this advice (see Table2). The richness resides not in the advocacy provided by the coach, but rather in the dialogue that is evoked by this advocacy. The coaching process has become truly appreciative when advocacy is complemented by a invitation to joint inquiry, for the coach and client are assuming that the answer resides not with the coach, but either with the client or as an emergent property of the co-created rich dialogue that follows the coach's advocacy.

Table 1: Advocacy-Inviting-Inquiry

Questioning Strategies

Type One: Advice-Giving
- "Here is an idea that I would like to offer: xxxxx. Let's explore the positive and negative aspects of this idea." [finding the seed of a good idea in every proposal]

Type Two: Case Study
- I had the following experience that seems to be similar in some ways to what you are experiencing. Here is what happened: xxxx. Here is how I felt/reacted: xxxx. Let's explore the ways in which this experience is similar to and different from what you have experienced. [objectifying a subjective experience]

Type Three: Absurd Suggestion
- Here is an idea that is off-the-wall, weird, irrelevant: xxxx. Let's explore the positive and negative aspects of this idea." [finding the seed of a good idea in every proposal]

Type Four: Analogy/Metaphor
- Your situation reminds me of the following: xxxx. Let's explore the ways in which this analogy/metaphor relates to and doesn't relate to your situation.

Type Five: Clarification/Summarization
- This seems to be what you have said/Let me summarize what I heard you say: xxxx. In what ways is this an accurate statement and in what ways would you like to correct or add to this statement? [paraphrase]

ORGANIZATIONAL COACHING FROM
AN APPRECIATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Whether one chooses, as a coach, to be a thoughtful and active listener, or to be someone who provokes dialogue by advocating, the effective organizational coach is appreciative—especially when working with seasoned and accomplished leaders. As the appreciative coaching process meanders, new directions emerge on the path. As the roots and branches of the acorn seek their own growth, the organizational coach allows for a free and protected space within which his client can experiment. Appreciative coaching involves a process of "walking with" one's client through complex problems related directly to their job and indirectly to

their entire life. Organizational coaches challenge their clients' basic frames of reference and assumptions, while simultaneously supporting them in facing their demanding roles as leaders. In taking an appreciative perspective, a coach deeply values his client by willingly engaging in a dialogue from an assumption of mutual respect and a search for discovery of distinctive competencies and strengths. Cooperation is recognized as a value. Within this context, one's client feels safe to explore capacities and issues to develop and unfold her deeper self.

Table 2: Comparison Between Easing-In and Advocacy-Inviting-Inquiry

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Easing In [Loaded Questions]

- What do you think of this idea?

- Do you think that maybe this is the issue?

- Is my experience relevant here?

- Do you think this analogy/metaphor is accurate?

- Do you think this accurately summarizes your statement?

Advocacy-Inviting-Inquiry

- *Advocacy:* Here is an idea/experience/analogy/summarization that I would like to present to you [and perhaps why I want to present this idea.] [option: check on colleague's understanding of the idea being presented]

- *Inviting Inquiry:* Let's explore the strengths and weaknesses associated with this idea/experience/analogy/summarization [and perhaps why this exploration might be of benefit to colleague.] [option: I will go first, suggesting some of the weaknesses associated with this idea as it related to your situation/issue.]

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Masterful organizational coaching begins and ends with an inherent assumption that the primary source of information about a client resides within her rather than in other people. Initially, this would seem to be a rather individualistic and isolating assumption—and it certainly can lead to isolation if a client chooses to rely exclusively on her own perceptions and resources in making a decision or acting upon this decision. The primary purpose of organizational coaching is to break out of this isolation. The organizational coach serves first as a witness to the reflections of his client and serves second as a sounding board (or perhaps more accurately a mirror) that enables his client to observe her own internal processes from a point of detachment.

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