

# Appreciative Leadership

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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. When leaders try to solve operational problems they only have second hand information – they are removed from the problems - so their solutions often don't work. It takes time for leaders to even find out operational problems exist and things slip through the cracks. Front line employees have little commitment to implementing solutions they don't agree with. For these and many other reasons, modern organization design gives those closest to problems authority to solve problems. So if managers aren't solving problems, what do they do?

Appreciative leadership is one solution for managers in modern organizations. Appreciative leaders rely on the people doing the work to solve the problems. Instead of focusing on problems, appreciative leaders 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. When they find something that is aligned with their purpose, they find ways to amplify it.

The first step to being an appreciative leader is developing an appreciative mind set. As it turns out, this isn't easy for many people. Our society trains us to see the glass half empty, to notice what is broken, lacking, needs fixing, and isn't good enough. In organizations a lot of the drama of management is taken up by identifying the gap between what is and what should be, the ideal and the actual, the goal and current performance. We are fixated with problem solving. As soon as current performance gets close to the goal, we more than likely move the goal line. As a result, people live in "gap land" a majority of the time—that place of not good enough. Some try to put a positive spin on it with words like "challenge" and "opportunities," but most people see the ground their managers stand on when they use those inspirational words as gap land. So they feel the gap, not inspiration.

## **PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU WANT MORE OF**

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 it 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? The skills of the appreciative leader require building on strengths, not overcoming weaknesses.

Secondly, for it to be a truly appreciative mind-set, you need to touch people's imagination, aspirations, and spirit. You may want one more widgets produced, but that in its self 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, make a better world, fulfill our dreams, gain new hope, surpass expectations, be a part of a dynamic and caring team, and make a valued contribution—these are the kinds of things that an appreciative leader pays attention to. For example:

*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: Jerry said, “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. “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?” I asked. All he could come up with were 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. The regional manager said, “OK, we’ll start out with Bernice, but if you feel you need more support on this let me know.”*

*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. Bernice had never taken initiative on anything before. He realized that an appreciative change process had been set in motion. 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.*

Developing an appreciative mind-set is not something most of us can do overnight. I have met a few people who seem to be naturals at it. For most of us, however, it is a life-long task to focus less on what isn’t right and focus, instead, on what is right.

## **TRACK AND FAN IT WHEN YOU FIND IT**

Once the appreciative leader knows what she wants more of, she *tracks* and *fans* it. Tracking means staying constantly aware of what you want more of and noticing it, even when it’s only in little amounts. Fanning means finding ways to amplify what you’ve found, turning a little flame into a roaring blaze. One appreciative leader I know personally tours his far-flung operations twice a year. He spends 1 or 2 days while managers and employees make presentations on the best improvements they’ve made in one of three areas: increased operating efficiency, customer satisfaction, and product improvement. His expectation is that the people who were personally involved in the improvements will make the presentations. If he believes there’s more potential in an idea or a group of people, he will give them more resources to keep doing whatever they are doing. In a sense, he has trained his

managers to do his tracking for him and just his personal attention and methods of amplification has insured a steady stream of improvements for him to fan.

In addition to just paying attention to what you want more of, you can fan through praise, blessing, and asking for more. Praise refers to appreciating something that has already happened. When we are praising we are calling attention to something that has already been done and appreciating it.

Blessing is about the future. When we bless something, or someone, we are giving them license to continue being what they are. Getting a blessing from a manager who just attended a course and is following his “three blessings a day” program doesn’t have much kick. But a blessing from a leader who sincerely appreciates what you are doing has an impact. And when blessing comes wrapped in tangibles, such as money or resources to increase your effort, amplification is assured. One of the first acts of blessing I witnessed early in my career had a big impact on my understanding of the power of appreciative leadership.

*The regional general manager had come to the plant and was shown what two skilled tradesmen had devised in their spare time. Using some discarded circuit boards and electronic parts they had gotten the maintenance superintendent to buy, they had been able to get two different machines on the production line to “talk to each other.” They had invented the basics for a crude programmable controller, now a mainstay of any modern manufacturing plant. At the time however, these did not exist. The general manager said, “I was in a meeting last week where the engineering staff told me that what you two have done is impossible!” He then, on the spot, gave them half a million dollars to spend however they saw fit to extend their work. You want to talk about two incredibly motivated, pumped up guys. It not only affected them. Everyone in the plant took pride in their accomplishment and the blessing they received, and that helped to amplify their efforts in numerous ways as everyone pitched in to make them more successful.*

Through paying attention to what they want more of and tracking and fanning it when they find it, appreciative leaders can create cultures of continuous improvement and organizations where people feel pride in their work and committed to their organizations.