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Learning Leader: Creative Pieces

When Learning Leads

What would happen if, instead of looking to people for leadership, we looked to the process of learning? That is the theme of this exploration of Appreciative Inquiry and experiential learning. With learning as our leader, our perceptions of ourselves, our organizations and the world around us change. New horizons are glimpsed and the future unfolds naturally; curiosity shifts our inner dialogue and inquiry leads to living models of equity and wholeness. Learning is our leader.

We are lifelong learners. Our love for learning has brought us great joy. For forty years, we have facilitated learning processes with professional groups striving to improve their organizations and communities in more than thirty countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. This has taken us into the public and private sectors as well as NGOs in the context of community, international and organizational development.

Early in our experience as adult educators, the focus of learning and change was based on a “needs analysis” paradigm. In the early 1990s, we were introduced to Appreciative Inquiry (AI) which fundamentally changed our entry point for learning. We saw that engaging individuals to create positive images of the future generated hope and inspired constructive action. We took up the challenge extended by Cooperrider and others “...to create a positive revolution of learning and change by experimenting with appreciative modes of inquiry yet to be discovered” (Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, 2001).

Recently, we were inspired to write about our experiences in the call for proposals to this publication. Composing this article created an opportunity to reflect on how our approach to learning has been influenced by AI. And how it has defined and shaped our leadership, and that of those we have met on our journey. Rather than speaking about leaders as learners, we began to consider that learning is a leader.

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What would be different if we saw learning itself as a leader? How would this change the way we live and what we create? This kind of question is at the heart of AI. Cooperrider called AI “More than a technique, AI is a way of organizational life – an intentional posture of continuous discovery, search, and inquiry into conceptions of life, joy, beauty, excellence, innovation, and freedom.”

When learning is the leader, we find ourselves following practices and pathways of discovery rather than following people. We challenged ourselves to describe what life and society would be like if learning was the leader. In dialogue, we synthesized nine insights from our practice of AI and experiential learning. As you read this article, reflect on the idea that the aspirational approach of AI creates a strong platform for learning to lead in purposeful and positive directions, starting from a platform as broad as the world around us, to our organizations and to ourselves.

Stop and reflect

Events and media coverage in the world today can push buttons of fear and disheartenment, creating a treadmill of reactions. When learning leads... it is possible to stop and reflect. Stopping to reflect broadens awareness. Reflection fosters an atmosphere of learning for all and enables discernment of a positive, life affirming response. Learning allows us to choose a response rather than act on compulsion.

Humble discovery

In a world where the ruling paradigm privileges financial wealth, experts and extroverts, the power of personal experience can be marginalized. When learning leads...inquiry becomes the norm. Together as learners, we build cultures and systems that are based on the practice of humble discovery. This learning community becomes a living model for a society of equity and respect.

Delight in the rich variety of stories offered

In the world today, many think of those outside their worldview as the “other”. Seeds of fear are planted when we consider the other as a threat to our security. In such a “social garden” this attitude makes people shrink away from exposure to differences, not wanting their beliefs to be challenged. When learning leads... there is delight in the rich variety of stories offered by those of diverse cultures and worldviews. The effect is a “blossoming” of collective learning, a wholeness which enriches all.

Curiosity and wisdom guide co-creation

When learning is dictated by a “set of deliverables” determined by others, the capacity to self-direct is lost. When learning leads...curiosity and intuitive wisdom guide the co-creation of newness and better ways. Learning taps into

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the generative core of a system, empowering the capacity to self-organize. Then life becomes a cyclical dance of discovery and creation.

Inquire from an appreciative mindset

We live in times where many views diverge about the best path forward. A lack of clarity and accountability seem contagious. In such situations, questioning current practices becomes problematic and truth-seeking is perceived as resistance. When learning leads...inquiry from an appreciative mindset ignites positive change. It creates coherence between the inner world of values and their external expression in action. Integrity and personal accountability are sovereign. Then theory seeks application, insight shapes expression and realization extends into co-creation.

Hidden dimensions seeking expression

In organization environments with overwhelming complexity, sticking to one way of doing things provides an illusory safety net – thus enshrining the status quo. On the surface this may look like rigidity. When learning leads... we can see beyond the physicality of scenarios, to the hidden dimensions seeking expression. Deeper inquiry can reveal subtle messages, new insights and multiple perspectives shifting the language of the inner dialogue. Inspired by essence and simplicity we create new worlds with our words.

Awareness of limiting assumptions

Today it is as though time is the master of all. We run after it and bow down to the pressures created by limited timeframes. We are constantly seeking more time. Managing priorities more effectively has NOT freed us. When learning leads ... awareness expands beyond time to reveal the underlying assumptions that have been limiting our discovery of solutions. Then we are free to imagine new possibilities. These lead to new questions which open doors to new behaviors and ultimately to self-realization.

New pathways

Insecurity can lead to too much planning for the future. At the same time, we miss opportunities to give of ourselves in the present moment. When learning leads...new horizons are envisioned and pathways are noticed that have not been travelled before, often with new companions. The generative capacity of the individual is ignited and true discovery leads to practical ways to co-create with others. The future unfolds naturally and beautifully as a result.

Mistakes: an opportunity for new learning

We experience unwelcome events and circumstances that follow us through life. Sometimes these “memories” are unwanted weight, adding a burden that clouds thinking. Clarity may be lost. When learning leads ... mistakes provide an opportunity for renewal, refinement and new learning. Reflection strengthens the capacity to discern the wisdom of lessons learned and to let go of the rest.

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The very act of identifying the best of what is helps change the story and the non-life-giving memories fade away.

When each day begins with an inner attitude of inquiry, there is a quest to seek learning opportunities – for the self and others in our workplaces, communities and broader networks. Interactions based in an appreciative approach provide space and opportunities to engage in inquiry and genuine learning, and to refine ways of making our communities and organizations better places to be.

The principles outlined above have been revealed through the application of an AI approach, inspiring moments of collective learning. The spirit of Appreciative Inquiry encourages learning to be our leader. It ignites conversations that open hearts and minds to the healing vibrations of wonder. New possibilities become public.

Learning IS our leader.

REFERENCES

Ludema, J., D. Cooperrider and F. Barrett. (2001) Appreciative Inquiry: The Power of the Unconditional Positive Question. In P. Reason, H. Bradbury (Eds.) *Handbook of Action Research*. Sage, 189–199.

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