The Appreciative Self and Appreciative Change Processes

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

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In most organizations 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 the 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 several 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 closest 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 answers and act on them.

These are some of the very reasons that new, agile forms of organizing are being created. These organizations flatten or remove the hierarchy 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 less than what can be created when managers are using the skills of Clear Leadership[1].

Facilitating a group to bring out its collective wisdom and then making the best decision one can is less about a skill and more about a way of being. It takes those interested in leadership

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[1] *G. Bushe. Clear Leadership: Sustaining Real Collaboration and Partnership at Work.* Davies-Black, 2009.

development out of the realm of horizontal development, and into what's recently be called vertical development [10].

For almost two decades, leaders who've been through the Clear Leadership program have learned these and other key lessons that make them exceptionally capable of creating outstanding teams with high levels of belonging, inclusivity, and performance. With our combination of Clear Leadership for leaders, Clear Partnership for their followers, and the lifelong membership with over 1,000 like-minded professionals in the Clear Leadership Network to support their ongoing journey, many experience a transformation in their ability to feel psychologically safe at work.

Clear Leaders 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 the Appreciative Self.

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 Self chooses to pay attention to things he or she values, care abouts, is happy with and wants more of. Using an appreciative approach requires 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 process 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.

To get the most from an appreciative process, 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 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 Self pays attention to.

Jerry, a manager who was trying to develop his Appreciative Self found himself stumped over a problem employee. 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.*
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> *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 self, 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 and other people are noticing it too. She actually stayed late at the office last week!" 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[2]

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 few unappealing consequences:

• 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.

• 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.

• 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.

• Addressing problems, setting targets and working to accomplish them creates a culture of problem-centered 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

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[2] I published my first paper on this over 30 years ago! Bushe, G.R. & Pitman, T. (1991) Appreciative process: A method for transformational change. *Organization Development Practitioner,* 23:3, pp. 1-4.

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 it's 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 Self, bringing out the best in people. Appreciative Selves amplify the parts in others that want to succeed, want to make a contribution, want to achieve, want 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.

Appreciative Process is simple, but not that easy. It requires you to:

1. Figure out what you want more of.

2. Find small examples of it, what I call tracking. It's just like tracking game in the jungle. You look for any indication of what you want more of.

3. Amplify it, what I call fanning. Just paying attention to something tends to amplify it, but noticing it out loud, describing what you saw and asking for more, is what turns a little flame into a roaring fire.

The master tracker is able to call out what they want more of even if it's hard to see.

Joan had been transferred to a new job, supervising an outpatient clinic that was part of a large health system. The first day she walked into the clinic, she was disappointed in what she found. The vibe in the room was depressing and the clerk behind the counter did not even turn around to greet her or acknowledge her presence. She thought to herself 'this has to change' but wondered how? The clerk was a unionized employee with many years of seniority. Joan didn't think corrective feedback would make much difference. So this is what she decided to do.

A week later, after coming up with her strategy, when she walked into the clinic, she said "You know Betty, when I've had a hard day and I walk in here and get your big beautiful smile, it just makes me feel a lot better", and continued on to her office. Now, Joan had never seen Betty's big beautiful smile, but she was working off of two reasonable assumptions. One is that Betty had a big beautiful smile (doesn't everyone?). The second was that if she saw it, she'd feel better.

The next day, when Joan entered the clinic she found a plate of cookies on the counter that Betty had baked. At that moment she started to see the part of Betty that wanted to make people feel welcomed in her space and began to track and fan the part of Betty that was a gracious and kind hostess. With a few weeks everyone coming into the clinic was being greeted with a smile.

Managers operating from of an Appreciative Self engage others in doing their tracking and fanning.

Jason was the VP for Worldwide 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 assess 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 several 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 self has many 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.

Ted Lasso and the Appreciative Mindset

Watching season 1 of the hit Amazon TV comedy series, Ted Lasso, starring Jason Sudeikis (former Saturday Night Live favourite of mine). was a master class in appreciative process. I learned a few things watching him turn a group of recalcitrant, cynical athletes into a winning team that anyone leading people will find useful.

The story begins with hiring an American college coach, with previous success turning losing teams into champions (but little knowledge of soccer) to manage an English Premier League Football (soccer) Club losing badly. Naturally, the players, fans and sports media are stunned and dismayed. Ted faces an onslaught of hostility that he slowly turns around through a consistent and authentic Appreciative Self, aligning with people's positive intent and focusing on what he wants more of.

As the story unfolds, there is more going on than initially meets the eye. Ted himself has a difficult personal challenge that he must deal with. Still, everyone who interacts with Ted comes away just a little bit better. In the second episode, we see Ted bring the team's best shooter, a narcissistic, divisive, non-team player, into his office for a talking to. But rather than pointing out what he doesn't like or want, he describes an image of the player as he could be, in terms that clearly captures the player's imagination. However, nothing is that easy (and I find the show a lot more realistic than your typical sit-com) and it will take more to turn this man-child around.

There are many memorable scenes of fanning. I was particularly taken by one where Ted gives everyone on the team a book as a gift. As the team captain (an ageing once-was-a-star but now seems mainly bitter) questions him about why he did that and why he got A Wrinkle in Time, a reporter who overhears the conversation tells him, "It's the story of a young girl's struggle with the burden of leadership as she journeys through space." The player asks Ted, "Am I supposed to be

[3] This is an example of an "appreciative inquiry". I've written many articles on this and all are available from www.gervasebushe.ca. The most comprehensive is Bushe, G.R. (2012) Appreciative inquiry: Theory and critique. In Boje, D., Burnes, B. and Hassard, J. (eds.) *The Routledge Companion To Organizational Change (pp. 87-103).* Oxford, UK: Routledge.

the little girl?!?," and Ted replies, "I'd like you to be." Later we see the player reading the book to his 8-year-old niece and realizing that he faces the same call to leadership with a resounding "F**K!!". Then he goes and does what needs to be done.

"Success is not about wins and losses," Ted tells the local reporter, "It's about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field. It ain't always easy, but neither is growing up without someone believing in you." Throughout the show, we see how "growing up" is the solution to almost all the problems that face each person, the team, and the organization, and how being held by the gaze of someone who believes in you is part of what's needed to take that journey.

Having the best of us seen by a leader we look up to has much more significance than simple positive reinforcement. The noted psychologist, Heinz Kohut, has shown that being seen positively by someone we look up to (what he calls a "good enough selfobject") is indispensable for developing a healthy Self. Studying 2-year-olds, he found it is when our presence is seen and enthusiastically received by the selfobject (e.g. mother) that our core sense of Self is strengthened. We continue to deepen and strengthen our Self all our lives, and I believe this kind of "leadership" is just as necessary for us to keep growing as adults. Through a strengthened sense of Self, people then do things they didn't think they were capable of, take new risks, and accomplish what they may not even have dreamed of.

Many well-intentioned leaders who believe in egalitarian values and building great teams are not comfortable with this task or don't realize that one of their jobs is to be a good enough selfobject for the people who work for them. They would feel pretentious and embarrassed, as if they were putting themselves on a pedestal and destroying the very sense of collective responsibility they try so hard to create throughout their organizations. They do not understand that by letting others make them a father or mother figure who sees their potential greatness, they are creating a kind of food that is needed for people to grow into the best versions of themselves.

One of the things those of us who are consultants and educators need to do is help leaders understand that an appreciative mindset helps build winning teams, like the 2022 superbowl winners[4]. Their appreciative presence is required to nourish the system. It's useful to know that a person who lets themselves be that good enough selfobject doesn't feel used up when others feed on them because actually what they are doing provides the context in which people feed themselves. A good enough selfobject is an experience we each create for ourselves, and who are we going to choose to be that for us? Someone who sees the worst in us, or someone who sees the best in us? It is one of the least depleting forms of team building available.

Watching season 1 of Ted Lasso is a great way to watch the power of the Appreciative Self unfold. The cynical reporter who was commissioned to write a feature on Ted eventually writes, "If his coaching style is wrong, I don't know what's right... In a business that celebrates ego, Ted reigns his in. His coaching style is subtle. It never hits you over the head, slowly growing until you can no longer ignore its purpose."

All in all, the skills of the Appreciative Self 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 mindset and see the opportunities for using appreciative processes requires letting go of a lifetime of looking for problems, seeing what's missing and paying attention to the gap. We are all heirs to a deficit mind-set; it may even be the result of evolutionary selection. 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.

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[4] https://www.inc.com/justin-bariso/super-bowl-2022-rams-bengals-positive-psychology-emotional-intelligence.html