



AI Practitioner

Positive and Appreciative Leadership

Guest Editors: **Sarah Lewis and Lesley Moore**

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International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

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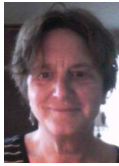
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The Leadership 'Sweet Spot'

ABSTRACT

How can a leader contribute their energy and vision without dominating a project? Hospital leaders faced this wicked question in a patient safety initiative designed for high engagement of front line staff. While some leaders had difficulty letting go, others failed to provide essential elements of support. Coaches identified seven strategies in that 'sweet spot' where leaders create space for distributed ownership while, at the same time, use their status to contribute in positive ways.

Where can a leader contribute energy and vision to an initiative without dominating it?

What's the right balance between providing direction and leaving room for others to define it?

How can a leader step back to invite others to take the lead without becoming disengaged?

These are the wicked questions we faced when coaching appreciative leaders as part of an ongoing multi-year initiative using high engagement processes to involve everyone from front line hospital staff to top executives in preventing transmission of superbug infections in more than a dozen hospitals in the US, Canada and Latin America. It is estimated that nearly 100,000 people develop invasive, medication-resistant infections in the US each year, resulting in approximately 19,000 deaths. Of these infections, about 86 percent are healthcare-associated. Typically, hospitals attack this problem with educational campaigns aimed at making sure everyone knows what 'best practices' they should be doing to avoid transmissions, with very little progress.

In 2006, Plexus Institute received a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to explore an alternative change-methodology based on the insight that knowledge alone doesn't change behavior. We observed that the typical top-down approaches don't work. Although some problems can be solved with new technology or breakthroughs in medical practice, many problems turn out to be simple, in the sense that changes in how caregivers do basic things – like hand washing – turn out to make the critical difference. Everyone 'knows' which practices keep that from happening but few hospitals have figured out how to get everyone to comply with these practices consistently.

Showing up can be the most important thing a leader does.



The coaches on the project identified seven strategies that are in that 'sweet spot' where leaders focus on creating space for maximum engagement while, at the same time, manifesting the positive power of leadership energy:

Show up

Showing up might be the most important thing you can do. It's great when an executive opens a meeting by welcoming participants and saying something positive about the effort. But it makes a stronger point when they actually stay after their speaking part is over and participate in the whole meeting.

Demonstrate that you value and respect what other people are doing by simply being there. Making a little time in your schedule shows that what they're doing matters enough for you to make time. That's probably your most valuable asset. Leaders send a powerful message by being there to listen. During one volunteer meeting, a hospital CEO actually took the magic marker and captured ideas being generated by staff on the chart paper himself. Participants reported this made them feel that he valued what they were saying enough to document it. There could be no better thousand words than that image, letting people know that there was a leader who really valued what they were doing and saying and saw his role as allowing and actively supporting them to work on the problem.

Say yes

Word travels fast in most organizations. When a leader can approve an idea generated by staff early on in the project – even a relatively small one – it creates buzz. Have your antennae out to notice simple ideas that emerge early in an initiative and find ways you can use your resources to support them.

For example, van drivers who drove patients from the long term care facility to the hospital for tests and appointments were included in discussions about stopping infection transmissions. Now that they were aware of the importance of regular hand-washing they realized that they didn't have a convenient way to do it and asked if they could have some gel dispensers in the vans. This relatively cheap and easy idea was approved by the CFO and the dispensers were installed in a matter of weeks.

Word got around that it was now worth contributing ideas because leaders were ready to take action. Suddenly the story that was getting told around the organization was not one about 'why nothing ever happens around here'. Instead,

Let people know of your interest and reward and support others who do the right thing.

Someone on the staff had the guts to tell the CEO to put a gown and gloves on. That is significant change in a culture where people don't dare do that if they think someone is more powerful than they are.

it was a story about someone who had an idea, made a suggestion – and saw it implemented.

Spend your social capital

Leaders have relationships with all kinds of key stakeholders: the board, the management team, their peers, various community leaders. You can do things to help get others on board to contribute positively, or at least get out of the way of the momentum building around a new idea. Let people know of your interest and reward and support others who do the right thing. This might mean asking them to make it possible for their team members to spend time participating in an initiative; or reaching out so that others feel included. Engage with your leadership team to figure out how to make room for new approaches within competing priorities.

Dr. Michael Gardam, a medical director at University Health Network in Toronto, Canada points to one of the CEOs he is working with as a good example. This CEO acknowledges that he is not an expert in patient care, so he trusts his frontline staff to be the experts. He sees his job as helping them bring about improvement; he helps makes connections with needed resources for them and backs them up when solutions they generate need his support.

Share stories

Make sure you have channels of communication set up so that you hear the juicy success stories, big and small, that emerge from the community and can tell them yourself – to spread the essence of what is happening. One great example happened when a hospital CEO began telling what he thought was a negative story. He had gone after hours to visit a patient in an isolation room where everyone who entered was supposed to wear gloves and gowns to prevent infection transmission.

He started to go in without doing that because he was in a hurry, not noticing the sign indicating that precautions were needed. A nurse stopped him saying, 'Wait! You can't go in there without wearing your gown and gloves!' He thanked the nurse for reminding him and let her help him put the gown on. When he first told the story he felt terrible because he had started to do the wrong thing.

On reflection, it was clear that this was a fantastically positive story. Someone on the staff had the guts to tell the CEO to put a gown and gloves on. That is significant change in a culture where people don't dare do that if they think someone is more powerful than they are. So he was encouraged to tell that story often and widely, sending the message, 'here, we are going to remind each other no matter where we are in the hierarchy'.

Synch-up scattered programs

There are all kinds of things going on at any given time in an organization: different initiatives, programs and technologies. People in leadership roles usually have a meta-level view of what is going on, while many people in the trenches feel that each new thing is an unrelated add-on. One of the things leaders can do is to help people appreciate the relationships between multiple initiatives so they develop a more integrated view. Leaders can ask people appreciative questions helping them make connections, such as 'How does your program complement what people in the other department are doing?' or 'How could you leverage the synergies between what you and others are doing?' It is



Share stories

important for leaders to avoid creating a dynamic where people feel that they have to compete to be the leader's current favorite. Instead, appreciative leaders add value by creating the space for people to make connections.

Sweat the small stuff

We know that many small actions can result in the big change effect desired. When leaders step aside from the role of leading by making large pronouncements from center stage, they sometimes find they have even greater impact through finding small ways to express their interest. At one hospital, the Resource Team wrote personal notes that the CEO signed and mailed to the homes to let staff members know that their work was appreciated. It didn't take much time but the fact that they were noticed and acknowledged made a big impression on staff and their families.

Suspend judgement

You've probably tried a broad range of options and activities in your organization. When you engage a more diverse group in conversation about a problem you will probably hear some old ideas and your first response may be: 'We've already thought of that and it didn't work.' But when you allow people to explore and develop ideas (unharmful ones), it will either emerge that fresh thinking opens up a workable possibility, or people will develop their own understanding of why something won't work, without losing energy for finding the solution. You will end up in a very different situation because people now have ownership of the strategy.

Pam Johnson, who led a large engineering group at a major computer company recommends: 'Give a broad remit and don't hedge with too many constraints. Then allow people to rise to the challenge.' Before he retired, Henri Lipmanowicz was on Merck's executive team and responsible for the corporation's operations on three continents. He reflects, 'I tried to avoid manipulating people. I worked hard to create safe spaces for sharing ideas, and to practice what I call "active honesty". It sounds obvious and simple but it really isn't, which is why so many leaders don't inspire trust. I believed that people would not trust me if I didn't first demonstrate by my actions that I trusted them. So I took risks by trusting the ideas of people around me.'

The leaders in these stories found people willing to take leadership roles everywhere at every level of the organization as part of a 'bottoms up' approach. But that didn't mean there was no role for people with 'position power' in the organization. Actually it was just the opposite! There is a large and important role for these organizational leaders. It's just a bit different from the one they have been used to, and the one for which they were trained.

Dr. Larry McEvoy, CEO of Memorial Health System in Colorado, believes it's critical for leaders to create opportunities for as many interactions as possible because the process of finding the sweet spot is a continuous one. 'I think we lurch daily from too much control to too little direction. It's an iterative process where we are constantly finding our center.'

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Purpose of AI Practitioner

This publication is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as Appreciative Inquiry.

The publication is distributed quarterly: February, May, August and November.

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ISSN 1741 8224

AI Practitioner © 2003-2011 Anne Radford

