AI Practitioner

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Positive and Appreciative Leadership

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

Inside:

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

Inside:

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Inside continued:

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Positive and Appreciative Leadership

ABSTRACT

This issue focuses on engaging, stimulating, challenging, unexpected, surprising, oblique, inspiring and quirky accounts of Positive and Appreciative Leadership. Collectively the articles illuminate an emerging new idea of leadership: one that offers some answers to leadership challenges in a fast paced world where the future is unfolding in previously unimagined ways.

Leadership as relational

The stories from Davy and Weiss, Kimball, Gastaldi and Verma make it clear that leadership is not just about directing in a disconnected way from the front; it is about being in relationship – specifically a reciprocal relationship – with others. All these leaders recognize leadership as a social act. Their leadership is underpinned by a new sort of humility that recognises that leadership isn't about having all the answers; it's about creating ways for new answers to emerge.

Leadership as a balance between control and direction

In Whitney and Trosten-Bloom's article a new balance between direction and control is described. With a little less emphasis on control, and more on creating clear direction, an environment is created in which people are invited to step up and share leadership. This can be seen clearly in Verma's account of Oswal's approach to regenerating a cotton industry, and in Worthing's reflections to Schiller when she talks about 'letting things evolve'.

Leadership as belief in the value of everyone's voice and experience

Such relational leadership seems to begin with a firmly held belief about, or sense of the value of, the equality of people. As Worthing says 'attitude is a choice', and these leaders choose to take an inclusive and valuing attitude.

This shows up in the way different perspectives are cared about and respected: they are actively and purposefully sought. These varied perspectives can come from all parts of the organisation, from top to bottom, and from anyone with a known, potential or possible stake. This is well demonstrated in Polly and McCarthy's account of recognising the contribution of individual hotel staff actions to the overall culture.

Leadership as recognising the importance of shared information

Shared knowledge is seen as an essential component for great decisions and collective ways forward. Kimball's and Verma's accounts demonstrate the great

When you enable folks to explore their own ideas and even make their own mistakes, then new ideas and possibilities turn up.

'Everyday heros' in Mario Gastaldi's article on Appreciative Leadership in Italy

efforts made to ensure that everyone has the information they need to initiate change in their part of the system.

Leadership as integrity
The articles by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom and by de Jong both emphasise the need for integrity in the leadership. This is illuminated in Davy and Weiss's account of a leader's open conversational style creating an environment where people feel safe. Kimball also talks about inspiring trust, describing it as a reciprocal process. When you enable folks to explore their own ideas and even make their own mistakes, new ideas and possibilities turn up.

Leadership as inclusion
Whitney and Trosten-Bloom also talk about the genius of inclusion. All these stories and accounts describe a series of unique ways in which leaders took the time to ensure that everyone with a stake or information was invited to contribute. And then the leaders really listened; we mean really listened.

Leadership as searching for what works
Everyone's knowledge and perspectives are actively sought through a systematic, appreciative search for what works well, commonly in the face of adversity. This initial process is followed by a pro-active and public process of 're-telling' inspiring stories that pass quickly round organisations, providing new information about what to do more off, while simultaneously imparting secondary messages about how good news is getting noticed; how low level contributions are important, valued and indeed rather crucial; and how we're all in this together, and that what we say counts. Again Polly and McCathy's vivid stories describe this perfectly.

Leadership as celebrating everyday miracles
People are encouraged to recall and celebrate their calling. To be reminded of, or to reaffirm a calling is such a powerful motivator. People with a strong calling to their work perform minor miracles everyday, often unnoticed by others. In these accounts leaders take the time to notice the everyday miracles of bravery, courage, commitment or compassion.

Leadership as finding and celebrating everyday heroes
A related theme is, as Verma says, that of 'finding the hero and celebrating'. In these accounts the leader moves away from centre stage, stepping aside and inviting others to step up. They applaud the role of others in achieving success. In addition they make sure that credit is shared with all who contribute to success.

Leadership as getting out of the way
We also notice appreciative leaders getting right out of the way, enabling and supporting new initiatives to emerge and develop rather than blocking momentum by a fear of taking risks. Instead they just let things go ahead, thereby giving others the opportunity to find out if things don't work, achieving ownership and commitment in new and very powerful ways. Polly describes it perfectly: 'From one leader emerges many … a sea of leaders'. Gastaldi's story highlights an enviable outcome: one in which people from across the organisation began competing to provide solutions. We used to talk about harnessing momentum; this feels more like watching a space ship launch, and simply popping champagne corks when it goes right.

The reality is that when you create an environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued, yours, the voice of the leader, will be too; perhaps more clearly than ever before.

Leadership as being bold and taking risks

Within these accounts leaders act boldly and take risks. This resonates with numerous conversations we have had with leaders 'trying out' AI in a world where the traditional approach is one where certainties prevail, providing just about sufficient comfort that things are, and will be, as the leader dictates. These articles talk about how developing a new sort of trust involves a massive amount of 'letting go'. This can feel like riding a runaway horse: very scary. The reality is that when you create an environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued, yours, the voice of the leader, will be too; perhaps more clearly than ever before.

Leadership as creating connections and synchronism

There's also a theme in these accounts of a leader's role being about connecting and creating synchronism: the ability of people across organisations and networks of organisations to act in harmony and concert without detailed centralised direction. This develops from involving all the stakeholders and then spreading the connections outward, taking concepts about 'whole system' beyond the system you're in to lots of new stakeholders. This is achieved in different ways, but seems to go beyond our common understanding of the 'dreaming' process. When you convene, or usher in, a process in which previously unimagined stakeholders are swept in together, when everyone gets the new connections, and they begin acting collaboratively, then there is, as Verma describes, 'a leap' into shared glory and responsibility that extends far beyond one individual leader's original intentions or aspirations.

Leadership as an emergent, iterative, learning process

And within all this is Worthing's point: 'It is what it is. So just deal with it.' The message is about seeing what is, that is, that one leader couldn't possibly control a whole organisation just though forcing things to happen. Accepting this seems to be a core component of Appreciative Leadership. De Jong talks about this in a different way, introducing the idea of conscious 'practices' of courage and reflection and standing aside, noticing what's happening with an appreciative eye, and considering another leadership move to create the next part of the unfolding organisational dance.

Almost all the articles in this edition are accounts of practice. While they clearly embody appreciative and positive principles, not all make direct reference to the theoretical or research underpinnings. However our AI Resources (see page 47) give guidance on this. Cameron's book *Positive Leadership* is a very practical guide to using positive organisational behaviour to promote a positive organisational culture. While *Appreciative Leaders* by Schiller et al (2001) reveals the characteristics of appreciative leaders, based on interview research, *Appreciative Leadership* by Whitney et al (2010) blends experience based stories with principles, ideas, suggestions and tools. Lewis's chapter 'Positive Leadership and Change' from her forthcoming text *Positive Psychology at Work* presents Avolio's research on authentic leadership and ties it in with Higgs and Rowland's research on effective organisational change. Lewis identifies Stavros's SOAR and Cameron's Competing Values Framework as new approaches to strategy development that support positive and authentic leadership, and emergent change processes.

Sarah Lewis and Lesley Moore
Guest Editors, February 2011

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About the May 2011 Issue

AI++: Innovations in AI through the Australasian Lens

The idea for the issue grew from a conversation with Anne Radford about Sallie's experience of working with Australian and New Zealand consultants and organizations over the past ten years. Sallie has found the professionals she has worked with to be some of the most innovative she has encountered anywhere.

When we saw the publisher of AI Practitioner, Anne Radford, in 2009 at the AI Conference in Nepal, she asked us to guest edit a 2011 issue of the AIP on AI evolution and innovation in Australia and New Zealand.

Anne was curious about our observations on the way many Australian practitioners combine AI with other methodologies and approaches, to form what we began calling AI ++ (Plus-Plus). One of Sallie's theories is that these Southern Hemisphere countries have developed cultures of continuous learners who continually invite the new. They bring together different approaches in new and exciting ways.

Dayle's additional theory is that the Antipodes have 'benefited' from being later adopters of AI when the worlds of Positive Psychology, Strengths and AI (and others) are in conversation, exploring the next frontier and continually inviting new ways of learning and doing. Our curiousities have been sparked and the possibilities keep unfolding.

In this issue, practitioners describe where they are experimenting with AI itself, with new thinking about the principles and practice of AI, and with how AI combines with other OD applications and thinking to make a real difference in organizations in Australia and New Zealand.

While we already have very good submissions, if you think your experience just has to be read by a wider audience, please contact us now. We are looking for:

1. Actual cases of innovating AI applications: how and why they were chosen

2. Research being conducting about AI and other strength-based methods

3. Reflections on the field and practitioner's experiences in Australasia

Back to Table of Contents

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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.

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