


International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

February 2014

Volume 16 Number 1

ISBN 978-1-907549-18-2

 dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-18-2

AI Practitioner



www.aipractitioner.com/subscriptions



Adaptable Leadership

A Strengths-based Approach to
Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices

Wendy Campbell
Anne Radford

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Inside this issue

Welcome to February 2014 issue of AI Practitioner

In this issue, *Adaptable Leadership: A Strengths-based Approach to Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices*, you will find nine articles exploring the challenges facing adaptable leaders navigating complexity by choosing to look at their challenging situations honestly and appreciatively.

Enrique J. Zaldivar's Feature Choice article "Authenticity and Accountability: Key

to An Appreciative Stance to Adaptable Leadership" combines AI and multicultural competency principles, emphasizing the importance of discovering our unique cultural lens for effective leadership.

Research Notes presents a review of an earlier AI Practitioner issue, *Appreciative Inquiry in Asia*. We hope it will inspire many to read the August 2013 issue anew or offer their own review of previous issues.

Newly published resources as well as the classics on leadership have been brought together in AI Resources by the new editorial team.

All good wishes as we start a new subscription year!

Anne Radford
Editor, AI Practitioner

4 Issue Introduction

Adaptable leaders let go what no longer serves and encourage what is good

Guest Editors: Wendy Campbell and Anne Radford



9 Feature Choice

Authenticity and Accountability: Key to an Appreciative Stance to Adaptable Leadership

Enrique Zaldivar



20 Positive Adaptive Leadership and Key Principles of Practice in a Time of Uncertainty

Sarah Lewis



25 A Surgeon's Skills Become Business Skills

A Continuing Journey into Adaptable Leadership

Paul R. G. Cunningham and Bruce Flye



29 Leading Through Turbulence

Discovering the company's heart-beat and developing organisational resilience

David Gilmour and Rachel Retford



33 Adaptable Leadership in the Public Sector

Courage to Take the Strengths-based Approach for Key Outcomes

Steve Loraine



37 Culture Change and Strategic Conversations

Adaptive Leadership in Action

Ilene Wasserman and Linda Drexinger Durishin



42 The Diary of an Adaptive Change Agent

The Working Reality of Adaptive Leadership

Terri McNerney



47 Discovering Our Core Values

Leadership as Spiritual Fulfillment

Alfred Leung





Adaptable Leadership

A Strengths-based Approach to Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices

Inside this issue

50 Hope, Despair and Forgiveness: The Foundation of Leadership Resilience

A Conversation in Two Voices

Joan McArthur-Blair and
Jeanie Cockell



54 Leadership 4.0: From Ego-system to Eco-system

Framing a New Form of Adaptive Leadership as an Individual and Co-creative Process

Sally Paulin



59 Appreciative Inquiry Research Notes

A reader's review of the August 2013 AIP issue, *Appreciative Inquiry in Asia*

Neena Verma



63 Appreciative Inquiry Resources

Resources for practitioners wishing to explore further the idea of adaptable leadership

Matthew R. Moehle, Roopa Nandi and Hardik Shah



68 About the May 2014 Issue

How colleges and universities around the world are using AI

Lane A. Glenn, Kelly Saretsky and Nancy E. Stetson



69 About the sponsor of this issue

Corporation for Positive Change is a global consultancy that delivers systemic results by applying and advancing Appreciative Inquiry principles and practices.



70 Advertisement

Emerald Books - Leadership and Cultural Webs in Organisations
Appreciating People - A Taste of Appreciative Inquiry, An affordable 12-card pack
Dechen Choling - Mindful Leadership Development Retreat
Topics in AI Practitioner 2014

72 IAPG Contacts and AI Practitioner Subscription Information



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Adaptable Leadership

A Strengths-based Approach to Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices

Adaptable leaders have succeeded in navigating complexity by choosing to look at their challenging situations honestly and appreciatively. They have adapted themselves to letting go of what no longer serves them and encouraging what is good for the new order to flourish. The articles in this issue of AI Practitioner describe improvements at organisational, leadership, team and individual levels, and suggest how resilient leaders of the future might operate.

The successful leaders who are emerging with prosperous strategies for thriving futures are the most adaptable. They demonstrate the resilience to bounce back from the knocks that changes in their environment deliver and they have the adaptability to make the best of these changes. They also encourage this adaptability in their people.

This is both how we introduced our Call for Submissions and what we have seen in some remarkable and inspirational stories as we bring together this February issue on adaptable leadership. Finding a way to lead in deeply troubling situations, finding a way forward as harsh business decisions have to be made and finding the courage to take a compassionate and strengths-based approach when it is counter culture are all voices in this issue.

Adaptable leadership: Seeing the world anew

More than at any other time, the ability to lead is about standing back from the traditional view of leading; it is about being open with everyone about the complexities of a situation, making visible the uncomfortable options, supporting others in recognising and grappling with the ethical dilemmas involved in facing difficult decisions, and more than anything discovering and staying true to one's own core values so that actions are transparent and authentic.

Each of these leaders faces the traditional business issues of difficult market conditions, more regulation and accountability, pressure to improve financial performance or sustain previous growth with higher targets. Yet each leader has either drawn on their own experience of strengths-based approaches or brought in someone to work alongside them to work out with them how they can take a more

The leader's clear conviction is that each scenario is so different or complicated that it takes everyone's wisdom to get through it.

inclusive approach to achieving these tough goals. They felt this was needed since the old ways were not going to work in these new and constantly emerging situations. They deliberately put themselves in a place where they had to see the world anew.

To paraphrase Albert Einstein, it is about learning to see the world anew rather than trying to solve problems as they have always been solved.

Moving through challenges: Skills, processes, frameworks and models

The leader's clear conviction is that each scenario is so different or complicated that it takes everyone's wisdom to get through it. It is also their conviction that their role as leader is much more about enabling everyone to see the long-term possibilities and connect them with what they do every day, than developing a plan in isolation. And it is about caring about the people who work alongside them.

Their skills to achieve this included unassertive or quiet leadership where listening and being humble were important, where they refused to adjudicate and assert what was the "right" response in a difficult situation, or where they were honest about their own situation and the complexities they faced.

They used processes and frameworks that readers might expect: the strengths-based approach to strategic planning, SOAR, Appreciative Inquiry Summits to bring a whole system together to engage in an issue; Open Space Technology for people to raise areas they were most interested in; Nancy Kline's Time to Think so that people could slow down to listen to each other well; performance clinics where feedback was strengths-based; and communication methods such as videos, presentations and meetings with a strengths-based focus to highlight successes in the system.

Building-in improvements for sustainability

In the challenging environments described in the articles, adaptable leadership brought with it small improvements that could be implemented regularly as well as longer-term changes designed to build in a capacity to handle future challenges. This recognised the need to continuously improve the core work as well as increase the preparedness for further change that would come. Here are some of the improvements at organisational, leadership, team and individual levels:

At an organisational level:

- Holding day-to-day operational focus while looking to build something long term;
- Creating a short-term culture where people are able to forgive others as unenviable choices and decision-making come up;



David Gilmour and Rachel Retford write about leadership connecting deeply with a new team on page 29



Read about the external view: adaptable consulting for leaders on page 42

- Building an agile culture where people develop the capacity to deal with future changes and cope with ambivalence;
- Leadership connecting deeply to their teams by expressing their ideas simply, without jargon, and creating greater clarity around what comes next.

At a leadership level:

- Creating a personal link with many people through meetings, events, employee forums, annual town meetings;
- Creating energy that previous “worst-first” approaches often failed to ignite or sustain;
- Being challenged more by junior members as they were taking on more responsibility and ownership for the future of the business;
- Liberating people to test different approaches and take manageable risks;
- Promoting adaptive thinking rather than technical “fixes”.

At a team level:

- Asking themselves more questions about how to grow the business rather than passing the issues to senior leadership;
- Laughing and learning more; celebrating what was right; reducing telling and increasing inquiry to engage in better ways to work through challenges;
- Helping colleagues re-build confidence damaged by external inspection reports;
- Supporting officers and councillors to develop resilience and agility when negotiating external regulators’ expectations of problem-centred improvement;
- Working out a way to discuss and handle ethical dilemmas together.

At a personal or individual level:

- Being courageous in raising key concerns about the nature of performance management, tolerance of the mediocre and the way they worked with each other;
- Finding it easier to decide to leave a job that conflicted with their core values;
- Being brave enough to care about their people.

These leaders have adapted themselves and their people to new environments, letting go of what no longer serves them and encouraging what is good, for the new order to flourish.

Stories, case studies and emerging principles

These leaders have succeeded in navigating complexity by choosing to look at their challenging situations honestly and appreciatively. They have adapted themselves and their people to new environments, letting go of what no longer serves them and encouraging what is good, for the new order to flourish,

In this issue we have nine articles about how leaders are handling challenging environments and making difficult choices. In some articles they are referred to as adaptable leaders and in others as adaptive leaders; both are based on a foundation of resilience and adaptability:

- “Positive Adaptive Leadership and Key Principles of Practice in a Time of Uncertainty” by Sarah Lewis
- “A Surgeon’s Skills Become Business Skills: A Continuing Journey into Adaptable Leadership” by Paul R. G. Cunningham and Bruce Flye
- “Leading through Turbulence: Discovering the Company’s Heartbeat and Developing Organisational Resilience” by David Gilmour and Rachel Retford
- “Adaptable Leadership in the Public Sector: Courage to Take the Strengths-based Approach for Key Outcomes” by Steve Loraine
- “Culture Change and Strategic Conversations: Adaptive Leadership in Action” by Ilene Wasserman and Linda Drexinger Durishin
- “The Diary of an Adaptive Change Agent: The Working Reality of Adaptive Leadership” by Terri McNerney
- “Discovering Our Core Values: Leadership as Spiritual Fulfillment” by Alfred Leung
- “Hope, Despair and Forgiveness: The Foundation of Leadership Resilience – A Conversation in Two Voices” by Joan McArthur-Blair and Jeanie Cockell
- “Leadership 4.0: From Ego-system to Eco-system: Framing a New Form of Adaptive Leadership as an Individual and Co-creative Process” by Sally Paulin



Read about a surgeon’s adaptable leadership skills on page 25

We close with principles and new types of infrastructure that are emerging for leaders at these difficult times. In her article, Sarah Lewis offers seven principles for adaptive leadership:

1. *Keep leading* in the face of uncertainty and bad news;
2. *People first* – invest budget and leadership time at times of uncertainty;
3. *Engender hope and optimism* – to lift people’s eyes and spirits;



The bridge between leadership, anger and hope, Read more on page 50

4. *Learn to love emergence and discovery* – keep possible courses in mind;
5. *Call on the collective intelligence of your unit* – to keep finding ways forward;
6. *Have many review and reflection points* – to work with ambivalence and constant adaptation of plans;
7. *Reveal your authenticity and integrity* – even if that is unsettling for others.

In her article closing the issue, Sally Paulin describes emergent infrastructures for new ways of leading which include:

Co-initiating: bringing affected people together around shared problems/ideas;

Co-sensing: finding shared ideas and spaces that have the most potential and stepping back and “observing with one’s mind and heart wide open”;

Co-inspiring: allowing ourselves to connect with our creativity and our Selves – who we really are;

Co-creating: “Exploring the future by doing (prototyping)” developing innovative ideas and allowing ourselves to try them out;

Co-shaping: working with others to refine and scale innovations – being open to hearing other people’s feedback and review.

In essence, adaptable leadership is about trusting oneself, trusting your peers and people, and trusting that a good way forward through change will be found.

We hope you enjoy these remarkable and inspirational stories as much as we did.

Wendy Campbell and Anne Radford
Editors, February 2014



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About the May 2014 Issue

The Long-Term Impact of Appreciative Inquiry at Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities around the world have used AI in many ways. Many commit to AI as their primary approach to planning, and, in this issue, tell stories and share their strategies.

Colleges and universities around the world have used AI for strategic planning, professional development, conflict resolution, team development, celebrating diversity and many other initiatives. There is often a burst of energy and excitement around this “unconditionally positive” way of coming together in inquiry and dialogue, and bold, new futures are imagined. Then the organization turns its attention toward new opportunities and different ways of working.

There are also organizations that commit to AI as their primary approach to planning, as a way of being and working together, and as part of their culture. These colleges and universities have used AI more than once, over a period of several months or years, and now have new stories to tell and strategies to share.

This issue of AIP focuses on the long-term use of AI at colleges and universities around the world in an effort to answer important questions such as:

- What factors are important to organizations that use AI over time (or more than once)?
- How do organizations that use AI over time adapt their AI practices?
- What long-term, demonstrable outcomes have been achieved using AI?
- How has the culture of the organization been affected by the use of AI?
- What new learning/abilities/capacity has the organization developed through the long-term use of AI?

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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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Telephone: +44 (0)20 7633 9630
ISSN 1741 8224

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