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AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



Vision 2030: How a South African Provocative Proposition is Igniting Active Citizenship and Collaboration

Leadership in the Appreciative Paradigm

Edited by

Dan Saint and Joep C. de Jong

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Leadership in the Appreciative Paradigm

Welcome to August 2016 issue of *AI Practitioner*

Today is Friday, June 24th 2016 and, upon waking up this morning, I heard that the majority of the British people had voted “No”, which means that the United Kingdom will be no longer part of the European Union.

I was born in 1962, in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, a town that only a couple of decades before had been reduced to ashes during the early days of World War II. My generation has been incredibly blessed: we have been living all our lives in peace, security, and unprecedented health and wealth. Thanks to Europe. And now Europe doesn't seem to be “good enough” anymore for a lot of people.

We are faced with complexity, and we don't know what lies ahead of us. There seems to be a call for “strong leaders”, like Erdogan,

Putin, Trump, Johnson, Wilders, Le Pen: reincarnations of John Wayne, saddling up, riding into town to settle things on their own. Shoot first, ask questions later.

This issue of *AI Practitioner* is about a different kind of leadership, the kind of leadership which asks questions first, so we don't have to shoot at all. This issue is about relational and appreciative leadership. It is about curiosity, about bridging differences between people, about collaboration and bringing out the best in people.

This issue is also about the effects of a leadership which acknowledges people: in a pharmaceutical company, in a city administration, working with homeless people, stories that unfold in South Africa, South-East Asia, The Netherlands, the USA and elsewhere.

Since the late 1930s, the affirmative topic in our field of appreciative interventionism has been: “How can we create more knowledge about the constructive forces in groups and in our societies?” (Kurt Lewin) This question is gaining importance again. It is my dream for *AI Practitioner* to be a platform for stories that will provide us with hope and perspective. I would like to invite you all to share stories about events from which we can learn how we can enhance the constructive forces in our communities, stories about curiosity and social innovation.

I want to thank Dan Saint and Joep de Jong for their wonderful work: bringing together all the stories in this issue. Shelagh Aitken, as always, has been the editor, and, as always, has done a great job.



Wick van der Vaart
Editor-in-Chief
AI Practitioner

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Daniel K Saint, PhD

Dan serves on the faculty of the Center for Appreciative Practice at UVA. He is an award-winning leader, teacher and consultant helping clients lead positive change. Applying AI, his teams have achieved consistently superlative results. Clients served in over 40 countries range from Boeing, Daimler, GM and Intel to the Sasakawa India Leprosy Foundation.
Contact: dansaint@me.com



Joep C. de Jong

Joep C. de Jong is Founder of JLS International (JLS), associate of the TAOS Institute and member of the council of Instituto IDEIA. He uses AI in day-to-day business and has developed a special interest in what he calls 'The Soul of the Appreciative Leader, A Social Construct?', also the potential title of his Ph.D. thesis.
Contact: joepc@mac.com

Leadership in the Appreciative Paradigm

Together over the years, Dan and Joep have spent many hours sharing stories of applying AI and other social constructionist practices as leaders and action researchers in several organizations. Now, as guest editors of this issue of *AI Practitioner*, they have had the opportunity to invite others from across the globe into that dialogue. And, as you will experience, what a dialogue!

What a joy this work has been! You are in store for an abundance of thinking – some evocative, some provocative – from a broad spectrum of exceptional leaders and theorists. The contributors are a mix of practitioners, scholar-practitioners and scholars representing a global diversity of ideas. We are thrilled to present perspectives from several outstanding first-time contributors to *AI Practitioner* and equally honored to be able to share work from some who have made significant contributions that have shaped our community over the long-term.

The soul of the appreciative leader

In his Ph.D. dissertation research (*In Search of the Soul of the Appreciative Leader*), Joep is interviewing and filming a broad range of people cited by others as appreciative leaders. They span multiple walks of life, numerous types of organizations and several continents. What has emerged as figural for him is that while many of them may not even have heard of the concept of appreciative leadership, all had a natural awareness of what it meant to lead appreciatively. His film style seems to reach into the souls of those he interviews. (See the Resources column for a link to some of the films.) South African CEO Miles Crisp of Tarsus shared the idea of care and growth. Renowned ballet and tango dancer Charlotte Baines described the dance as only existing in the moment, yet in the moment the dance partners are sharing, inspiring and moving as one. General John Le Moyne, an infantry leader of elite military operations units, was the only participant that, when asked his hope for the future, emotionally responded: “world peace.”

The idea of the individual dancer is an illusion in tango.

As we trekked along our guest editor journey, we found ourselves stretching to expand our conversation beyond the initial topic of appreciative leadership. Our first chat with leadership sage Sunil Maheshwari from India was pivotal in developing the theme for this issue.

Tango and leading in an appreciative paradigm

Joep shared a story with Sunil and Dan about his recent experience of becoming a leader... in tango dancing. The story perfectly illuminated what we meant by leading in an appreciative paradigm. In tango, the dance of leading and following begins at the moment of the invitation and proceeds with the leader and follower engaged in embrace. The expression of the tango – the outcome – flows from relationship, mutual values and a shared vision. The dance is an act of connecting and trusting. It requires both to listen – to pay real attention to the other – and to pay attention to the rhythm, even before the first step is taken.

Here is the creation of the appreciative space in which a successful dance, including missteps, can unfold. Regardless of which partner is designated as the lead and which is the follow, the tango equally requires both roles. Neither follower nor leader can exist as a dancer without the other. The idea of the individual dancer is an illusion in tango – the dancers, and the dance, only exist in the moment of relationship. So, the story for the dance clarified our direction. We shifted from a focus on appreciative leaders per se toward leading in an appreciative paradigm. Here, there was an acknowledgment that all participants are important and have meaningful influence over organizational results. And, an appreciative paradigm offered a more generative topical area.

Supporting transformative leadership in a university

In our dialogic dance, Dan connected the ideas of invitation, listening and shared vision to other appreciative leaders. He has been working with a humble, transformational leader, Melody Biancetto, vice president for Finance at the University of Virginia. Recently, she invited about 220 people into a dance of setting the organization's strategic direction using Appreciative Inquiry (AI). From December of 2015 through March of this year, her team enthusiastically developed a core mission statement, an aspirational shared vision and a set of core values that has set the momentum to carry them into the future.

Melody calmly took these concerns in her stride, continuously communicating and extending the invitation to work relationally.

Resistance to participating in the process was initially expressed by some team members, who challenged the organizers, saying that it was the job of the leader to develop strategy. Melody calmly took these concerns in her stride, continuously communicating and extending the invitation to work relationally. In fact, in her initial communication to her organization and stakeholders, she mentioned three goals for the strategic planning process: the first was to deepen

The promise of social construction is that it provides an awareness that we, as humans in relationship through language, have created our current reality.

the relationships within in the organization. That was a particularly insightful and courageous goal for a CFO to espouse.

The result of this dance so far is that multiple, highly-effective teams are actively working to transform the organization and have taken the lead in improving collaboration, service excellence and employee engagement (networking, professional development, group events – and fun). With a highly communicative style, her listening skills and her empathy, Melody exhibits wisdom few leaders attain. She shows that no matter how brilliant or energetic one leader may be, a leader who can engage the collective wisdom and energy of her team increases potential positive outcomes exponentially.

Social construction: transforming the model

In conclusion, the challenge is how can we continue and even advance our progression in leveraging the underlying components of this appreciative paradigm. This requires a transformation, a major shift in how we deal with our organizations and with each other. The promise of social construction is that it provides an awareness that we, as humans in relationship through language, have created our current reality. (And that we then forget we created it.) Having that knowledge provides us the awareness and courage to boldly work toward a more desired model of a desired future.

To meet that challenge, we are going to start by reading all the wonderful articles to gain insight from appreciative, relational and other perspectives. From that insight, we will reflect on our learning, our past successes, our positive images of the future and then lead by example. We will dare to learn and actively experiment and not fear mistakes. And, we will continue to employ AI in innovative ways, as this is an active and effective application of social constructionist theory. What if leaders began to embrace the notion of leading from an appreciative paradigm? Could this hold great promise for the twenty-first century?

Now, for the exciting part, where we introduce the articles.

In “Vision 2030 – How a South African Provocative Proposition is Igniting Active Citizenship and Collaboration”, Louise van Rhyn tells the story of how South Africa’s future vision is fuelling active citizenship across the country. The article describes the creation of a co-action and co-learning program between business leaders and school principals that is firmly rooted in AI and has already touched 415 schools. Joep had the pleasure of meeting Louise at last year’s WWAIC in Johannesburg during the leadership forum and was impressed by her initiatives, bringing education and business together to realize a better society for all.



To read more about collaboration between business leaders and school principals in South Africa, read Louise van Rhyn’s article starting on page 9



To read more about leading appreciative in a challenging urban ministry, read Barbara Thomas' article on page 15

In “Appreciative Inquiry: A Method for Daily Leadership in an Urban Ministry,” Barbara Thomas offers a practitioner’s very inspirational story of using AI in several ways as a director of services for the Urban Ministry Center of Charlotte, North Carolina, which serves over 400 homeless people daily. Her team is using AI in multiple ways to guide their work and lead change but, most movingly, to guide conversations with their clients. Dan has to disclose the deep gratitude and respect he has for Barbara, who is a former student in the MSOD program at the McColl School at Queens University in Charlotte, NC.

“He’s Doing Less and He’s Proud of It”: A Conversation with Mirko Opdam and his colleagues about Appreciative Leadership. Mirko Opdam’s fellow-team leaders in Amsterdam’s administration often say: “In your team, it’s easy to be a team leader: the people in your team are open to change and they take responsibility.” Only two years before, this had not been the case at all. What did Mirko, being a relational leader applying AI, actually do to transform his team from an inward-looking, isolated group into a healthy, resilient and resourceful team?

In “Toward Relational Leading”, Ken Gergen brings brilliant insight into traditional perspectives of leadership as-command-and control and, as always, offers a liberating alternative. He chronicles the imperative for a relational perspective in leading and then outlines major dimensions and some relevant practices in relational leading. Dan also has to express deep gratitude to Ken as one of the most influential teachers in his life.

“Relational Leading – Appreciating Letting Go, and Not Knowing Where You Are Going” by Mette Vinther Larsen is a beautiful submission offering a similarly liberating perspective into relational leading. She provides an insightful, compassionate observation: “...and how this – even for leaders – can be understood as a liberating endeavor.” In our rush to criticize leaders operating from a command-and-control stance, we forget that it is not only followers, but leaders as well who suffer the consequences of our rigidly hierarchical constructions of management systems.

In “A Reflection on Leadership – from an Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner’s Perspective”, Pui Yin (Dorothy) Tsui has contributed an inspiring article around leadership as an AI practitioner from Asia. She reflects on her consulting practice and life journey in AI and connects the inspiration she has received from appreciative leadership. In a pragmatic culture and being a pragmatist herself, her clients’ questions and concerns have strengthened her emphasis of the practicability of AI and appreciative leadership.

Jen Megules, in “Relationally Responsive Moments That Enable Positive Change”, offers another article grounded in a social constructionist, relational



To read Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom's article on appreciative leadership, go to page 61

perspective. Hers is another authentic example of the work of practitioners. She tells a interesting story from Novartis that highlights relational leadership in action and provides insight not only into the high points and rewards from working as an Organization Development professional, but also offers a real-life glimpse into some of the messiness and challenges of working with humans.

In “Appreciative Leaders: Is *Then* the Same as *Now*?”, Marge Schiller and Jacqueline Stavros foreshadow their upcoming new edition of *Appreciative Leaders* (first published in 2001). The article is refreshing and insightful. Marge and Jackie are exemplars of what operating in an appreciative paradigm means. Without Jackie’s support and help as a dissertation committee member, Dan would not have completed his.

In “Appreciative Leadership: Responding Relationally to the Questions of Our Time”, Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, two prolific scholars and consultants in the field of AI and appreciative leadership, provide a useful, succinct and practical guide to the field. It is a wonderful summary of some of the key thoughts from their ground-breaking book *Appreciative Leadership*.

We would like to use this space to thank those who contributed to the issue of *AI Practitioner* that is in front of you. And our thanks goes also to those whose articles, for a variety of reasons, did not materialize. Nevertheless they were an important part of our journey. Being new to the “guest editor profession” it has been a pleasure for us to work with you all; your dedication, meeting deadlines etc. has been appreciated beyond words. And a special word of thanks goes to Carolyn Saint who assisted us in the editing process, her passion for quality and using the right wording helped us immensely.

Daniel K. Saint and Joep C. de Jong
August, 2016

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Founder, Instituut voor Interventiekunde (Institute for Interventionism), Amsterdam

Robbert Masselink

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Tony Ghaye

Founder and director, Reflective Learning-International

Sarah Lee

Head of Department for Sport at Hartpury University Centre, Hartpury College, UK

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Kevin Real, Ph.D.

Associate professor of Communication at the University of Kentucky and director of the Center for Appreciative Research

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Hans Uijen

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Using Quantum Storytelling to Bridge Appreciative Inquiry to Socio-Economic Approach to Intervention Research



David M. Boje

Regents Professor, New Mexico State University

Hank Strevel

New Mexico State University

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Lessons from the Field: Appreciative Inquiry in the US military



Captain Chase Lane, Dr. Dave Levy, Lieutenant Colonel Pat Heflin, and Major Paul Prosper

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