Leading Organizational and Academic Changes via Appreciative Leadership

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LEADING BY DESIGN

Dr. Rosa Rivera-Hainaj
Dean, Science and Mathematics
Lorain County Community College
1005 N. Abbe Road
Elyria, OH 44035
440-366-7280
rhainaj@lorainccc.edu

Dr. Rosa Rivera-Hainaj is the current Dean of the Science and Mathematics Division at Lorain County Community College, Elyria, Ohio. She holds a B.S. in Chemistry from the University of Puerto Rico – Mayaguez Campus and a PhD in Biochemistry from Case Western University, Cleveland, Ohio. Dr. Rivera-Hainaj has been a researcher, a faculty member and an administrator in higher education institutions that span from private liberal arts to public regional comprehensive to community college. She is a 2013 graduate of the Ohio Chair Academy, a current participant of the 2015-2016 Florida Advanced Academy and a 2016 recipient of an International Leadership Excellence Award.

Abstract

Appreciation reinforces positive behavior and morale. The field of higher education is changing by the minute, which can be overwhelming to those trying to keep up. Every one of us has something to contribute. An appreciative leader values what is unique about his/her faculty and staff, which makes them feel special and valued. It is the job of appreciative leaders to focus people’s attention in ways that inspire passion, discover opportunities and engage strengths. This session will provide guidelines and examples on how to build a culture of appreciative leadership in an institution of higher education. The attendees will benefit by:

• Having a better understanding of appreciative leadership.
• Learning appreciative leadership best practices.
• Practicing strategies in appreciative leadership that can be applied to many situations.
• Better understand how sustainability of projects is rooted in appreciative leadership.
• Better understand how to build up appreciative succession in an organization.

Introduction

The landscape of higher education, especially in the community college field, has become an ever-changing environment, where leaders must work together with their teams to ensure that students are best served during the ups and downs that occur. The Student Success Agenda and workforce needs have been at the epicenter of changes that occur. Many of the modifications are easy fixes, but most are not. It is human nature to resist change, independently of the outcome, because we become used to our comfort zones and are hesitant of adapting again. However, what made us evolve as human beings in the natural world is our capability to accept change. Organisms that do not adapt to change become extinct. So the question becomes, what is the most productive way to lead in times of change? Where do we put our energy and efforts to ensure that our employees are taken care off at the same time that we shift priorities and resources? But more importantly, how do we help our employees navigate the change ensuring that students are not a victim of the change? After years of being a practicing leader, it became clear that a great way to lead in times of change is by example and with appreciation.

What is appreciative leadership/inquiry?

“Appreciative Leadership is the relational capacity to mobilize creative potential and turn it into positive power—to set in motion positive ripples of confidence, energy, enthusiasm, and performance—to make a positive difference in the world.” (Corporation for Positive Change, 2016)

Appreciative leadership can also be studied from the field of appreciative inquiry (AI). The guiding principles that both define AI and guide its implementation include:
(a) the simultaneity principle (i.e., inquiry and change coexist simultaneously as participants engage in the questions);

(b) the poetic principle (i.e., changes the focus of the inquiry to examine what works best within an organization);

(c) the anticipatory principle (i.e., the power of the positive future image is the motivator for participants to act and engage in the process);

(d) positive principle (i.e., the overarching positive tone of the approach, which catalyzes positive and constructive findings). (Royer & Latz, 2015)

It is important to understand that AI is much more pervasive than a set of procedures: “AI is a philosophy, a method, and a set of tools that can be very useful in supporting leadership transitions and establishing a way of being in the day-to-day work environment in . . . any organization” (Keefe & Pesut, 2004). AI was developed through the research of David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastava at Case Western Reserve University (Simons & Havert, 2016). The approach of appreciative inquiry has been utilized to study development and climate status in organizations; however, not many utilize AI as a leadership tool in higher education, especially in this continuously-changing environment.

**What are some of the best practices in appreciative leadership/inquiry?**

There are at least four reasons for choosing AI for large scale applications: (1) when high levels of participation and cooperation are required, (2) the change process needs to be accelerated, (3) the work requires innovation among diverse groups in a high stakes environment, and/or (4) multiple change initiatives need to be synthesized (Fitzgerald, Murrell, & Newman, 2001).

The following practice tips are designed to support all levels of AI practitioners in strengthening their appreciative muscles (Fitzgerald, Murrell, & Newman, 2001):

- Begin with yourself. Practice being appreciative of yourself and others. Witness people doing something right and acknowledge them for it.
• Experience AI and get more AI training. Take an AI workshop or partner with a seasoned AI practitioner.

• Read everything you can about AI and its foundations and applications.

• Practice crafting appreciative questions.

• Try some AI interviews with your co-workers and family.

• Begin meetings with appreciative questions like “describe something that you/we did really well this week, something that made you excited and proud of our work together. What made that possible? What can we learn from this?”

• If you don’t have access to the top of the organization, start where you are; it may lead to the top!

**Strategies in appreciative leadership – Case examples**

Three case studies will be discussed (at the Leadership Conference) viewed from the appreciative inquiry/leadership lense:

a. San Pedro College Case Study: Staff Productivity and Morale (Ruben & Jurow, 2012)


c. Lorain County Community College: Appreciative Inquiry and the Development of New Mathematics Pathways (Rivera-Hainaj, 2016)

**Benefits of appreciative leadership in the sustainability of the organization.**

We want to ensure that decisions are made in ways that serve the current generation and those to follow. Even with the constancy of change, sustained purpose can be a compelling and enduring guide
to creating sustainable communities of work (Ricchiuto, 2005). Those who practice appreciative inquiry/leadership care how the decisions made today affect the organization tomorrow.

**Building appreciative succession in an organization.**

We want to keep cultivating the next generation of appreciative leadership/inquiry, so future generations are able to benefit from the fruits of the AI culture. Sustainable organizations are always looking ahead to the next generation of leaders. It is their duty to cultivate and support today the leaders of tomorrow (Ricchiuto, 2005). The nurture of future leaders is not an easy task, especially in the world we live of unpredictable finances and technological changes. It is up to the organization to determine the values it wants in their future leaders, without this it is very difficult to define the needs for leadership. We need to understand that succession planning is not only identifying people, but more identifying a set of values and leadership skills for specific roles within the organization. Appreciative organizations rely in mentoring key individuals that show passion for future leadership.

**Conclusion**

AI seeks to work from accounts of positive reinforcement, and it assumes that everyone has a positive contribution to make to the organization they work for. AI plays a significant role in change within organizations; especially it can be applied to changes in higher education as seen in the examples of San Pedro College, Northern Essex Community College and Lorain County Community College. We are just starting to see the benefits of appreciative inquiry/leadership in organizations of higher education. We are moving away from deficiency models and tapping on the potential of empowering our employees with appreciation and living an abundance model.
References


