How to Lead and Engage Employees Through Appreciative Coaching

By

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What is Appreciative Coaching?

Appreciative Coaching is strongly informed by the fields of Appreciative Inquiry, positive psychology and the strengths movement. Rather than coming from a problem-solving perspective and concentrating on what the individual or organization did "wrong," the focus is on cultivating the individual's or organization's strengths – what they are doing "right." What is working well? How can their strengths be harnessed and amplified? The positive and valuable aspects of the present situation are appreciated. There is a focus on exploration and discovery - of new and innovative ways to handle the situation.

> *"Positive Psychology is the study of what works."*
>
> -Tal Ben-Shahar

Problem Solving Perspective

Generally, people focus on problems - in fact, cognitive studies show that it is "natural" to focus on the negative (Kaufman, 2007), on what is going wrong, and try to fix the problem, instead of focusing on what is going right:

- This occurs in organizations, e.g., when there is a debrief after a project has been completed - "What went wrong?" "What could we have done differently?"
- It happens with our children - we focus on the "C," or "D" they received, rather than on the "A" or "B." We try and find a tutor for the lower grades.
- When we receive our performance review, we focus on the "Doesn't meet expectations" or the "Meets expectations" rather than the "Exceeds expectations."
- As a trainer reading a "smiley" sheet evaluation of our training workshop, we focus on the 3's and below, rather than the 4's and 5's.

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Problem Solving	Versus	Appreciative Inquiry
Assumption: The organization is a problem to be solved		Assumption: The organization is a source of infinite potential
Deficit Thinking – What to Fix?		***Possibility Thinking – What to Grow?***
• What is the problem?		• Appreciate what is working
• Root causes of failure		• Root causes of success
• Search for possible solutions		• Envisioning the preferred future
• Action planning		• Innovating to create a sustainable future
Focus on weaknesses and gaps		*Focus on strengths and possibilities*

Figure 1: Underlying Concepts of Problem Solving Vs. Appreciative Inquiry Perspectives

The figure above demonstrates how the problem solving and appreciative inquiry frameworks are diametrically opposed.

When you are coaching your team members, which perspective do you usually follow?

Benefits of Appreciative Coaching

- It focuses employees on their strengths and how they have used their strengths to achieve previous successes.
- It empowers employees and builds their self esteem.
- It allows team members to figure out their own solutions, providing a learning opportunity, and increasing their professional and leadership development (this is especially important for Millennials and high potentials).
- It improves employee engagement as team members have greater buy-in to any decisions reached.
- Collaboration is increased.
- Teamwork is enhanced as it demonstrates a positive model for team members to use in how they relate to their colleagues, and how they can focus on possibilities rather than problems.

How You Would Use Appreciative Coaching in Practice?

If an employee was having a conflict with another person:

- Using a problem-solving approach, the focus might be on when those kind of problems had occurred before, and how the employee had handled them; on how/why he has those types of problems with that kind of colleague; and if he has these sorts of issues with other colleagues.

- Using an Appreciative Coaching approach, the focus would be on the employee's strengths and what he is already doing well, and how his strengths can be used to support him in dealing with this conflict. You might elicit ways he could harness his strengths to accomplish his goals and handle the conflict. Perhaps you would have your employee appreciate his colleague, valuing the strengths of the colleague so that he can maximize the contributions of both of them, creating a win-win situation to overcome the conflict and ensure successful completion of the project. Although problems are acknowledged in Appreciative Coaching, they are used as learning opportunities.

Here's another example: Suppose you have noticed that a direct report is not an effective teambuilder. In an Appreciative Coaching approach, instead of focusing on what she is doing wrong, you would concentrate on what she is currently doing right in terms of team building, and what other strategies she could use to increase her teambuilding skills. The shift in perspective is small but very powerful - rather than "fixing" the "problem" your employee will now be accelerating her teambuilding skills. You help her to identify and evaluate her strengths, and how she can apply them creatively with her team. (Kaufman, 2007).

Appreciative Questions

> An appreciative or positive question is:
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> *"A question that seeks to uncover and bring out the best in a person, a situation or an organization."*
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> -Whitney et al., 2002, p. 89)

The foundation of appreciative coaching is the appreciative question.

Problem Solving Questions	Appreciative Coaching Questions
Focus on weaknesses and gaps	**Focus on strengths and possibilities**
• *What went wrong?*	• *Can you tell me more?*
• *Who dropped the ball?*	• *How have you handled these kinds of situations in the past?*
• *Why did you do that?*	• *How could you use your strengths to handle this?*
• *How will you fix this?*	

Figure 2: Examples of Problem Solving and Appreciative Coaching Questions

Figure 2 illustrates some problem solving and Appreciative Coaching questions. Take a look at the Appendix, which is a list of Appreciative Coaching questions.

Assumptions of Appreciative Coaching

An Appreciative Coaching perspective can be used with virtually any coaching model. (FYI, in our book - Hilliard & Lopez, 2019 - we describe the GROW model which was originally presented by Sir John Whitmore, 2017. You can also search on the internet for information on this model).

The assumptions are:

- There is a focus on strengths, possibilities and growth
- Positive questions will elicit the best of your employee
- What is working well is determined first
- Your employee is resourceful and already has many of the answers
- Collaboratively, the desired future is established
- You support your employee in their plan/s

Using a strengths-based Appreciative Coaching approach results in greater employee engagement, improved motivation, higher productivity and enhanced well-being. Why not give it a try?

See the Appendix for a list of Appreciative Coaching questions

References

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APPENDIX – SOME APPRECIATIVE COACHING QUESTIONS

- What are your strengths?
- What went well?
- What did you do that you're proud of?
- How could you use your strengths to repeat this in the future?
- How could you use your strength/s to handle this?
- How have you handled these kinds of situations in the past?
- What would success look like?
- What did you do that helped you get through it?
- What small step could you take now, towards achieving your goal?
- What have you learned from this situation?
- What do you think you should do now?
- What have you learned today?
- What did you most enjoy about work today?
- What energized you most when working on the project?
- What do you need from me, to set yourself up for success?
- What are your options in this situation?
- After weighing up the options, which path do you choose?
- What assistance have you had?
- What resources did you use?
- What resources do you need now?
- How do you plan on developing your skills/strengths?
- How did you feel supported by your team?
- How could you effectively leverage the strengths of your team?
- How did you feel supported by me?