

Developing Leaders of the Future NOW
VISION to IMPLEMENTATION focusing on Inquiry and Action

Two methodologies are in focus: Appreciative Inquiry and Action Learning. In this article we explore beyond the leadership competencies and examine the opportunities that may arise when we sequence these seemingly 'opposing' methodologies in a leadership development framework.

Effective leadership development program design

An effective leadership program directly impacts the profitability and competitiveness of the business. In addition, it ties into some of the current and evolving business priorities, in a way that the time and resources spent on such a program create an immediate bottom line impact, while developing leaders. Below are some ideas to explore:

1. The participants experience 'the power of the other', throughout the program rather than just focusing on self awareness, skills development and personality analysis.
2. The participant team is able to experience the impact of inquiry and the elevated thinking that results from it.
3. The program has elements that stretch the participants to both the extremes of the polarity - ideal to practical, strategic to tactical, problems to dreams, high energy to low energy and so on.
4. The individual and organizational strengths, values, aspirations, dreams and successes are given more focus rather than gaps, deficiencies, failures, weaker links and missing themes.
5. Whole system engagement and meaning making conversations in large groups are balanced with expert meetings in small groups and targeted best practice implementations.
6. The program focuses on sustainability, internal capacity building, emergent leadership and liberating human spirit by focusing on what gives life and vitality in us.

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| <p>Action Learning</p> <p>Problem centred Learning focused Small group oriented Ground rules guided</p> | <p>Appreciative Inquiry</p> <p>Future focused Dream centred Large group oriented Inquiry guided</p> |
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Questions to challenge the current paradigms

Here are some questions if explored, would lead to ideas to enhance an existing leadership development program.

1. How are the participants returning their investment of time and energy to the organization?

2. How much time is spent in dialogues and meaning-making conversations in comparison to problem solving, strategizing and action planning?
3. How structured is the program and how much is left to the flow? How does the program help the participants to leverage the power of self-organization?
4. What does the program do, for the participants to be 'generative'? What is the balance of dialogue and diagnosis?
5. How sustainable is the design and delivery? What is about the program that guarantees long term success?
6. How much of the content is centered on systemic themes and what is level of engagement?
7. How do we oscillate between strategic and tactical, small group and large group, tangible and intangible, action and reflection, doing and being, internal and external, imagination and reality, play and work?

Appreciative Inquiry & Action Learning in Leadership Development

Due to the depth of the principles involved and the breadth of the approaches, it is almost impossible to satisfactorily define Appreciative Inquiry or Action Learning in a sentence or two.

Appreciative Inquiry is a change methodology predominantly - in a nutshell, AI provides us tools and processes to recognize and enhance the best of what is, in service of a future vision, continuing the momentum through ongoing strength conversations.

Action Learning is a problem (or a goal or a challenge) solving process, usually carried out in a small group of people in the presence of a learning coach who provides feedback, asks questions to let the team assess its own performance and supports them to elevate the performance and the quality of their solutions.

Appreciative Inquiry and Action Learning, when integrated into the leadership development not only bring about increase in impact, but also begin a process of culture transformation naturally in the organization. These approaches have been extensively used in leadership development, organizational change, talent management and learning workshops in the past with high levels of success.

Strengths in weaving the two approaches

Here is just one illustration that shows the unique value in weaving the methodologies into a leadership development initiative:

1. Appreciative Inquiry allows for large scale engagement of people across the organization, that brings to the forefront, the experience and the benefits of a whole system approach, the potential in improbable paired conversations, the power of positive deviance and the vital organizational energy unleashed from celebrating success, values, dreams and high points.

Action Learning facilitates small group focused conversations, after identifying a specific goal or a challenge. It benefits the team by helping them experience the importance of listening, asking, observing and being present in conversations, while being cognizant of the process as well as the content.

2. Appreciative Inquiry begins with strengths, values, successes and visions of the future. The conversations are typically high energy, unstructured, free flowing and positively constructed. There are one on one conversations, small group conversations and large group sharing.

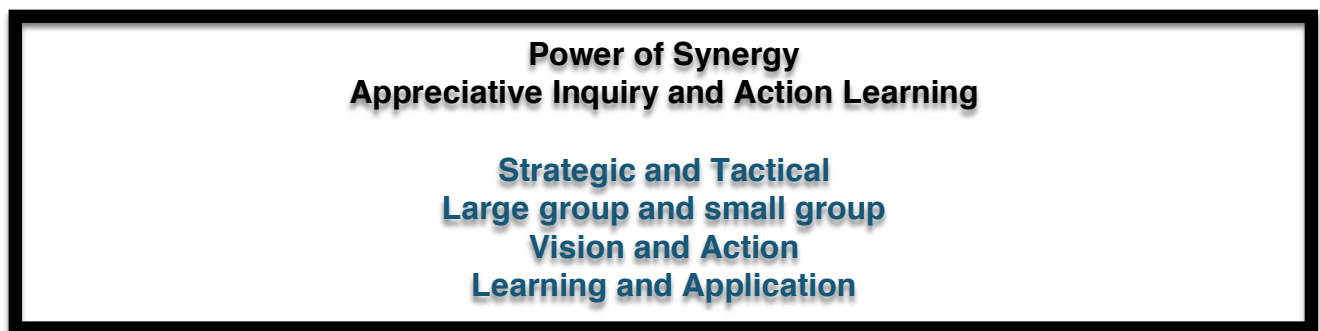
Action Learning begins with a challenge or a problem currently experienced, moving towards actions to be taken to resolve it in the immediate future. The dialogue is reflective, short, focused, stretching, question centered and predominantly in small groups.

3. Appreciative Inquiry inquires into the root causes of success, alignment in values, big picture dreams and collective energy in action. The groups tend to contribute towards strategies, visions and ideal future, searching within them for their own dreams.

Action Learning challenges the assumptions, identifies root cause of the problem, defines strategies to resolve the problem and defines specific actions in order to test the strategy on the field. The process rather than flow, is centered around interventions to increase performance and effectiveness of the teams in resolving issues.

4. Appreciative Inquiry built around the meaning making process through social construction, engages participants through a predefined inquiry strategy, builds relationships, release the positive energy.

Action Learning focuses on critical analysis, pointed questions, aims convergence by narrowing the choices, focuses on differences to move towards consensus and assesses the performance through evaluative scale questions.



5. Appreciative Inquiry focuses on learning from the best of the past, envisioning an ideal future and making meaning through present conversations. The positively powerful narratives uncover the patterns of success, leads to inspiration and life giving energy in teams. The learning is implicit, not articulated apart from experiences, and not documented as lessons learned.

Action Learning as the name implies, focuses on explicit learning from every experience, sets expectations for learning outcomes, builds learning through doing, records and shares learning. The presence of a coach intensifies learning and elevates the group performance, thus leading to high performance work teams.

Conclusion

Leadership defines the culture of an organization and in turn influences the performance. The traditional notion of leadership is under scrutiny. A new vision for leadership is evolving and the conversation continues. Dancing with the seemingly polarized world is the way to handle uncertainty - AL (problem centered) and AI (strengths focused) are seemingly opposing each other philosophically, yet unleashes power from their synergy as instruments for change and growth, as much as Yin and Yang for our universal order.

Written by

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