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Good Leadership

An Appreciative Discovery of Expectations

By Lia Bosch

"Once upon a time there was a leader who wanted to be the best leader possible in the organizational kingdom in which she worked. She sought out the wise Zen Master to help her discover what she did well and what she could do better. As the Zen Master consulted a number of people who knew the leader, the Zen Master discovered that each person had a different perspective about her. There were similarities but each person's view was colored by his or her background, previous experience, and direct and varied interactions with the leader. The Zen Master's advice to the leader was: 'Leadership is relative. Seek to understand and be understood. Set expectations and clarify expectations.'"

SO BEGAN MY perspective that good leadership is in the eye of the beholder and that it is influenced by the specific relationship between people and the 'social construct' they have developed together.

Given this perspective, understanding and enhancing good leadership is more a journey to discover and dialogue about what we and others expect of leaders, rather than a process to assess and correct our actions against a standard set of ideal leadership competencies.

It is with this notion in mind and our experience with Appreciative Inquiry (AI) that two colleagues and I conducted an appreciative based study into 'good leadership'. We used the AI process to learn about what 'good leadership' meant to a diverse group of people and we explored an approach to leadership growth that could be used by organizations and communities alike.

This article describes what we learned about 'good leadership' from the people we interviewed in our initial study and from people I have engaged in dialogue about leadership in a number of workshops. It also discusses in broad terms an AI approach to leadership enhancement that focuses on surfacing perceptions and expectations about leadership and creating the leadership capability required and desired by specific organizations or communities.

WHAT IS AI AND WHY USE AN APPRECIATIVE APPROACH HERE?

Appreciative Inquiry is both a philosophy and a process for creating change. As opposed to problem solving that looks at the root of problems to identify courses for correction, AI looks

at the root of successes to discover the underlying conditions that should be employed going forward. In this respect, AI focuses on solutions. For example, rather than asking about what a leader is doing wrong in delegating to others, an AI based approach asks about what a leader does to delegate effectively. A subtle difference: ask and focus on what one does when things are working well rather than what one should not do when things are not working well!

The foundations for AI are social construction theory (Gergen, 1999) and research from a number of fields on the power of positive image. Dr. David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University first articulated the AI theory based on research from studies in medicine, behavioral psychology, education, and anthropology. Simply stated, the underlying theory purports that the world we live in is created through social interactions among people and that the physical world is subject to human interpretation—i.e. human reality is based on perception and personal experience.

The research on the power of positive image substantiates a number of human behavioral principles that are useful to leaders and insightful about the behavior of leaders; namely, that:

- **People are more motivated towards action when they hold positive images of their future** as witnessed by the evolution of cultures (Cooperrider, 1999) or the work by futurists (Bell, 1996).
- **People perform better when they and others believe in their abilities** as shown by numerous studies in education on the Pygmalion effect (Cooperrider, 1999). In the education sector, Howard Gardner's work on Multi-

ple Intelligences has highlighted the importance of seeing talent from different perspectives and thereby encouraged educators to appreciate differences and support students in enhancing their talents rather than labeling them as 'low potential' (Gardner, 1993).

- **People can impact their performance through positive imagery and influence their physical well being**

through their mental processes. Brain research in the medical field has shown the connection between psychological and physiological processes (Cooperrider, 1999; Bennett, 2001). As well, research in athletics proves the effectiveness of visualization in physical performance (Rushall & Lippman, 1997).

Of particular relevance to leadership is the research on the Pygmalion effect. Fundamentally, the studies show that the perceptions that people hold of others (and of themselves) influence how they behave towards others (and towards themselves). Their expectations of performance become reality when their behavior reinforces the reaction or experience expected from the other person. The beliefs we hold of each other and of leadership in general influence how we see each other's success and effectiveness. Our perceptions and actions can be reinforced by the 'inner dialogue' in organizations or stories shared about each other (Bushe, 2001).

To illustrate the Pygmalion effect, when working with one coaching client, and in talking to two of his direct reports, I found that each had opposing perspectives of the leader. Both had based their perspectives on a particular event—the renegotiation of their employment contracts. One person said that the leader had been very fair and in fact the most fair he had ever experienced in a boss, while the other said that the leader had been selfish and unethical in his actions. Based on that one defining experience, each person saw the leader's effectiveness in a different light and behaved differently towards the leader in subsequent interactions. The person who thought the leader was fair developed a good relationship with the leader, while the other person saw the leader as untrustworthy and continued to question the motives for the leader's actions.

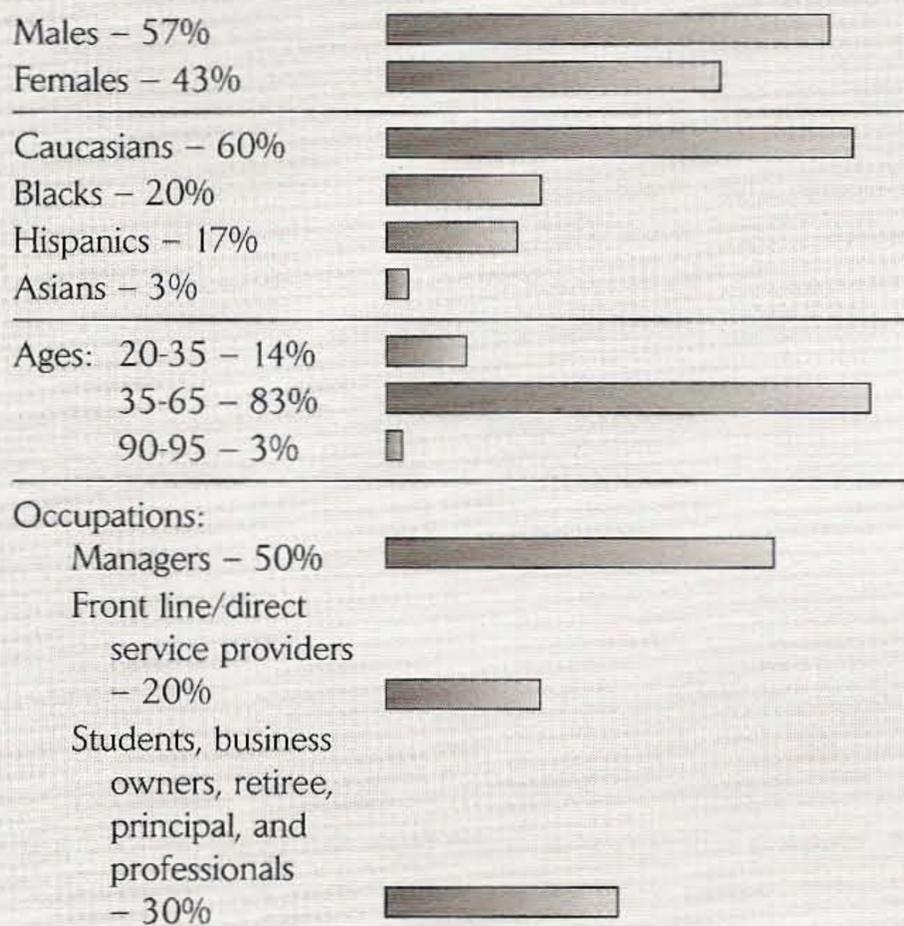
Reinforcing the above point, one of the participants in the AI on good leadership fondly recalled a leader who had supported him and said, "I pictured him a little differently; others don't see him as a good leader. He has a one-on-one leadership style and doesn't come across with a lot of charisma."

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**FIGURE 1:
GOOD LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHICS**



WHAT DID WE INQUIRE ABOUT?

By understanding more about what others see as good leadership, leaders can learn about the expectations people hold of them in the leadership role and can influence the perspectives of others about good leadership. A leader can also establish goals for growth grounded in what's important and realistic.

In the spring of 2001, my colleagues and I conducted an initiative on good leadership to learn more about what good leadership looked like to individuals. We tried to find a broad range of people to interview, rather than focusing only on asking leaders. We also maintained a broad focus to our inquiry as we wanted people to talk about the experiences most meaningful to them regardless of the context of leadership. We later applied the learning to organizational settings as we explored a process for leadership growth.

In our initial process, we interviewed a total of thirty one people representing as diverse a group we could find from the United States and Canada. The mix included people from both genders, a number of races, ages, sexual orientations and occupations and people in direct service provider roles. *Figure 1* outlines the key statistics about these interviewees.

Since the initial study I have also used the interview questions in my work with leaders and teams. The findings in the article reflect my conclusions based on over 30 additional interviews.

In our initial study, we were curious about whether we would discover significant differences among interviewees. Our bias going into the study was that, given the diversity in today's

**Table 1:
APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY ON LEADERSHIP-
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Tell me about a time when you saw someone practice, you yourself practiced, or you were influenced by the practice of good leadership?
 - What happened?
 - What are some of the key things you remember about this experience?
 - Why did you choose this example?
2. How did it affect the community/team/company in a positive way? How did it affect you?
3. In order to affect the future in a positive way, what trait, ability, skill, and/or characteristic do you want a leader to have?

society, leadership must also be diverse to better respond to the needs and desires of people; and we hypothesized that there would be different concepts of good leadership depending on the level of the person interviewed.

Table 1 lists the questions we used in the interviews following an extensive discussion on the focus for inquiry. Writing questions is particularly important in AI since a founding principle suggests that questions are the seeds for change. Dialogue between two people has the power to change perspectives and create shared meaning.

As shown in *Table 1*, we began with a broad question asking about people's experience with good leadership. We added several other follow up questions to gather more detail and ended the interview with our version of the "Three Wishes" question. The three wishes question traditionally ends an Appreciative Interview by asking the person what hopes they have for the future of their organization, profession, community, or in our case a leader. In a solution focused way, this question gives the person a chance to articulate what they would like to see happen in the future that may not have happened in the past.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Curiously, 62% of the stories described examples of good leadership from the community versus a business organization. We were a bit surprised by this result but understood it, given that we asked a broad question about leadership. This result confirms for me that leadership is a personal experience because interviewees recalled examples of leaders who had impacted them personally rather than talking about the managers to whom they reported.

Of course, context is also important. When I asked the same questions in two workshops subsequent to the initial inquiry, the themes from interviewees included at least one that

**Table 2:
FIVE FACTORS OF GOOD LEADERSHIP**

1. Integrity
2. Demonstrate and 'live' respect for others
3. Confidence in self and one's beliefs
4. Passion and the ability to communicate that passion
5. Commitment to action

was specific to the group. For example, a group of non-profit volunteers identified the "capacity to develop civil society, ethics, and volunteerism" as an important theme for a 'good leader' they had met. In another example, a group of employees from an oil and gas exploration company identified "technical skills and background to support strategic decisions" as an important factor for good leadership.

Another interesting observation we made in the initial inquiry was that most people readily recognized examples of good leadership in others rather than in themselves. Those who did tell us about themselves as good leaders were 'low key' about their stories and often commented that their actions were, "just what I do." They seemed to think that their actions were commonplace. This is consistent with one of the factors we found as a theme of good leaders: they have confidence in their own beliefs and in themselves but in a quiet, humble way. This is also consistent with the Level 5 Leadership that Jim Collins describes in his book, *Good to Great* (2001). Humble leaders are quiet but determined.

With respect to people who spoke of others as good leaders, it is clear to us that they were revealing their own ideals and what was important to them. The stories of good leaders in many cases were about people who had influenced their leadership approach or had influenced them personally. By observing the leaders they spoke of, the interviewees had created an image of good leadership that they used as a guide in their interactions with other leaders and in the expectations they had of themselves. One of our interviewees ended her interview by saying, "I want to be just like her!" While on a more personal note, another interviewee who has extensive experience in Corporate America, spoke of her mother as a model of good leadership and commented that no one she had met in Corporate America had yet lived up to that image. These comments, once again, confirm to me that leadership is a personal experience that is influenced one-to-one based on interactions.

Although the stories we heard were very different, based on an analysis of the content from our interviews, we found five key themes in the stories. These themes are shown as factors that the leaders described in the stories exhibited—a combination of behaviors demonstrated and values imbued in their actions. The five factors are listed in *Table 2* and briefly explained below with quotes from our interviews.

Integrity—Good leadership means living by one's word; living and acting with integrity. It is about being authentic with oneself and others, comfortable admitting when you are wrong. As one interviewee eloquently described, good leadership has "rock solid integrity. [They] want what's best for the cause not what's best for themselves." In this context, integrity ensures that leaders do the right things rather than just do things right.

"Leadership means your ability to be honest rather than convenient"

Demonstrates and 'lives' respect for others—Good leadership has a deep sense of respect for people, believing in the human spirit and its basic goodness. Given this value, good leaders develop respectful mutual relationships with others as evidenced by the way leaders address people. They actively listen to others and seek to learn from them. As one interviewee said, "there is willingness to learn from the small person." Good leadership works with others rather than for others, sharing tasks and responsibility.

"Everyone felt equal; everyone contributed and felt that what they did mattered"

Confidence in self and one's beliefs—Good leadership comes from a deep sense of confidence in oneself and one's beliefs. With this confidence comes a well-centered person who focuses on the needs of others and the outcomes desired. The quiet and sometimes anonymous approach is a trademark of good leadership, inspiring others to be at the center and to be recognized for their contributions. "You don't have to be king to be leader." Understanding oneself and one's beliefs allows good leaders to know their boundaries, standing firm on their personal values while appreciating those of others.

"They didn't care about the 'light of leadership' shining on them—what was important was that they did the work"

Passion and the ability to communicate that passion—Good leadership energizes people through passion and the ability to communicate that passion. The passion described in stories was about what they did or believed, not about the individual's style of communication. As one person put it, "he stood up for others in service of others." People were influenced by the leader's underlying belief in the cause, work, or act, which infected their passion and motivated them towards action. In communicating with others, good leaders share their passions in a way that generates enthusiasm and gains commitment. This effect is primarily based on their deep seated passions rather than their communication style.

"We ran on passion rather than hard numbers"

Commitment to action—Good leadership is committed to action, with passion being a primary driver for this action. Good leadership does what it says it will do and takes responsibility for its actions. Good leaders bring high energy to what they do influencing others towards action and they “empower but do not overpower.”

“She took an entire Brownie troop to Toronto and Montreal. Wanted brown babies to experience themselves in another culture, hear another language; brought class and culture to her family and community.”

Finally, in the business stories we noticed a clear difference between people who represented different hierarchical levels. People at lower levels, such as retail clerks, talked about fundamentals of good relationships such as respecting others, listening to people, and leaders sharing in doing the work. People at higher levels, such as managers and knowledge-based workers, primarily talked about leaders demonstrating passion for their work and about being inspired by the leader’s actions. Clearly however, even at the higher levels the basis of the relationship with the leader was founded on respect.

AN IMPORTANT CONCLUSION

“Everything in this room, including you, is a manifestation of somebody’s dream.”
—Cathy Royal

The diversity of examples we heard in the stories from interviewees suggests that the specifics of good leadership look different to different people. For example, one person talked about respect for others as a leader taking his turn in mopping the floor, while another person talked about respect as giving employees participation in decision making. As mentioned earlier, one’s context and culture influence one’s experience.

A generic list of what leaders should be like is only a starting point in creating and enhancing good leadership. The five factors listed in this article represent what we saw as underlying conditions of good leadership based on an analysis of stories from the interviews we conducted. To understand good leadership from an individual’s perspective, you must look to the person. Extending this thought to organizations and communities, you must look to those who represent the particular context to understand good leadership. This perspective also leads to thinking about leadership development in new ways.

AN APPRECIATIVE PROCESS FOR LEADERSHIP GROWTH

The AI initiative in 2001 was the basis for exploring a new way of thinking about leadership development. We did not follow a pure AI process at the time because we did not have an ongoing and related group of participants to work with. However, we took the findings from the interviews and applied them to an AI 4-D Model (Mann, 1997).

Using the five factors identified and stories collected, we created a set of “leadership intentions” that represented the provocative propositions that a traditional AI would generate. These leadership intentions then became the basis for looking at leadership—as what is required and desired—from an organizational and individual perspective. The two pronged approach is important because it recognizes that leaders must be supported to be successful; the context impacts leaders and that the leaders impact the context.

Taking the leadership intentions as the foundation, we then explored what an organization supporting these leadership intentions could look like and what leaders who lived up to such intentions would need to explore in their development process. From the organization’s perspective, creating leadership capability requires looking at the infrastructure, relationships, and processes of the organization. From the leader’s perspective, he or she must look at the perceptions about leadership that exist in the organization (his/her own and others’), create personalized leadership intentions aligned with those of the organization, and develop a plan for realizing these intentions.

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Traditionally, leadership development in organizations has been a training initiative for individuals and often disconnected from the organization. With an AI based approach, I envision an ongoing leadership development process that is grounded in understanding leadership perceptions and expectations at an individual level but within an organization’s context. It becomes a process for dialogue in organizations and a basis for mutual learning and development—leader, follower, and organization.

BEGINNING YOUR JOURNEY

Do you want to learn more about good leadership? Do you want to be a good leader? If you answered yes to one or both of these questions, then you can begin your journey very simply in your current organization (or your community).

Different people and the new relationships you form bring different perspectives to the leadership experience. Opening the dialogue and continuing that dialogue with the people with whom you interact will ensure that their expectations and yours have a chance to intersect.

I encourage you to ask yourself and your team members the questions outlined in Table 1. For more specific feedback from peers, direct reports and supervisors, you might modify the questions to reflect a more personal response such as:

- Tell me about a time when I've demonstrated good leadership. What did I do? What were the circumstances? How were you involved? How did you feel?
- What impact did my actions have on you, the team, and the company?
- To positively impact the future, what characteristics, skills, traits, or ability do you want me to demonstrate as a good leader?

The journey into good leadership is ongoing. You can continue to ask the questions in *Table 1* or those listed above to new members who join your team. Different people and the new relationships you form bring different perspectives to the leadership experience. Opening the dialogue and continuing that dialogue with the people with whom you interact will ensure that their expectations and yours have a chance to intersect.

The meaning of good leadership will continue to evolve as you continue to dialogue with others and create a shared image of what is ideal and what is possible. ■

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