



THE CULTIVATION OF STRENGTHS THROUGH APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY
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The integration of Appreciative Inquiry with the emerging field of character strengths provides new opportunities for individuals, teams and organizations to capitalize on their resources. This paper presents a model that has been used over a five-year period in a variety of sectors including higher education, healthcare, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). We offer a process called “reflective appreciative practice” that intensifies listening and communication skills and enhances connections in relationships. Reflective appreciative practice ensures that all voices are heard, while also building “relational capital,” a vital asset that has been shown to be an important factor in increasing well-being, civility and prosperity in organizations and communities.

This model has been applied successfully across sectors. For example, we have used RAP with an NGO in southern Africa during a two-day strategic planning session to ensure that all voices were heard and the dreams of the community were expressed and witnessed before an audience. In clinical and organizational psychology and leadership training programs, reflective appreciative practice has been used to identify and cultivate strengths to meet the challenges of clinical training and leadership roles. Within a community mental health center, front line

employees learned to use reflective practice in order to create a dynamic program mission that represented the best of what the program had to offer, and in doing so increased morale and staff cohesion.

Reflective appreciative practice or (RAP) is a three-step process, beginning with assessment and reflection (R). First, an individual's strengths are assessed using a self-administered survey of character strengths. The participant then reflects upon and tells the story of his/her character strengths to an audience, which might be a team from work or a newly formed group. The presenter/storyteller then listens to appreciative reflections (A) from the audience in a process designed for "reflexivity" or the ability to fold back new knowledge onto the self. In our facilitation practice, we use a model in which the listener is a "fly on the wall" assuming a stance of "pure and attentive listening" with no responding permitted at the time of listening. It is a very powerful intervention that creates a safe space for the focusing of attention and memory. The team and presenter together then collaborate to discover new ways of consolidating these strengths in practice (P) to dream and plan for the future.

Reflect

We find it useful to provide a classification or scaffolding of character strengths in order to organize and conceptualize the reflection of these strengths. With this classification in mind, participants are positioned to reflect and refocus their attention and remember instances when the strengths were evident in their lives. This process of refocusing attention and memory is the hallmark of successful positive psychology interventions (Rashid & Ostermann, 2009). Strength based assessment approaches such as the Clifton StrengthsFinder have been used for over two decades and have linked employee skills, knowledge and talents with outcomes such as better

performance and productivity, morale and workplace satisfaction (Clifton & Harter, 2003). More recently Niemiec (2009) has offered an individually based model of change using the VIA. The VIA survey (Mayerson, 2010, <http://www.viacharacter.org>) is a next generation strength assessment and our model (RAP) offers a way to integrate the VIA with Appreciative Inquiry to cultivate individual and organizational capacity.

In their noteworthy work on character strengths and virtues, Peterson and Seligman (2004) define and explore 24 different character strengths and six virtue categories under which the strengths are aligned. These include: wisdom (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective); humanity (love, kindness, social intelligence); justice (teamwork, fairness, leadership); courage (bravery, perseverance, honesty and integrity, zest); temperance (forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation) and transcendence (appreciation, gratitude, hope, humor and playfulness, spirituality). In United States samples, curiosity, zest, hope, gratitude and spirituality were associated with work satisfaction (Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, & Seligman, 2010). Additional organizational research from cross-cultural perspectives is needed.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define “signature” strengths as strengths of character that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises. These signature strengths are considered to be vital to whom you are in your relationships and if you cannot use them, participants report feeling not true to themselves in some way. The reflection process requires participants to explore their signature strengths from an “origin viewpoint.” Participants wonder where the strengths might have come from, for example, are they genetic or learned, and what relational contexts encourage them to thrive? Using a well-documented Appreciative Inquiry methodology

(Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999), participants “tell the story” of their strengths. We have found that telling the story of your strengths to an audience allows the narrative to become a performed text. The story becomes active and alive as the storyteller puts their experience into circulation (Turner, 1986). This storytelling model has been demonstrated to work well in a wide variety of cultures, as it is a universal way to communicate and share information.

Appreciate

Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2000) is predicated on the belief that you can create deep and lasting change by focusing on what works, motivates, gives hope, empowers, and inspires change and innovation. This is a narrative, strength-based and collaborative approach used to raise all voices, identify and cultivate organizational strengths and values, sustain new initiatives, design program evaluations, consolidate stakeholder and community dialogues, and help create relationally responsible and flourishing organizations.

Appreciative Inquiry suggests that if you want to transform a situation or a relationship, focusing on strengths is more effective than focusing on problems (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). We use strength-based questions as the focus of our inquiry such as: When your team energized and connected, which of your strengths shine through? What creates nourishing, connected, and focused work relationships? What facilitates independence and self-sufficiency in your professional relationships? This is in contrast with a deficit-based focus of inquiry, such as: What is the problem you are having with your client? Where are you stuck? Can you tell me what is giving you the most trouble with your assignment? Appreciative Inquiry asks questions about what you want more of in your personal and professional relationships and assumes that

you will move in the direction of the questions that you ask. It assumes that every person, team, organization, and community has strengths and positive capacity that can be cultivated and enhanced.

Our model is also informed by the principles of dialogical practice (Bakhtin, 1975; Anderson, 1987; Schön, 1983) including the intentional creation of a “sacred” space for full and attentive listening, and adherence to set of structured guidelines for appreciative reflections (see guidelines on www.appreciativeaction.com). We find that this structure provides a container of sorts that increases feelings of trust and safety in the group process. This second step occurs after the strength story presentation when the group wonders aloud and offers reflections about the signature strengths of the presenter. The presenter sits outside of a closed circle and listens to colleagues reflecting on his/her strengths. After the listening stage, the presenter re-enters the group and has the opportunity to offer feedback about the ideas that were most striking, useful or meaningful.

Practice

Step three occurs when the reunited group envisions new ways to use the strengths in practice in the organization or community. Ideas may be generated about applications to both personal and professional relationships. How do your strengths manifest in your daily practice? Do they show up in your work life? How so? Are they discernible or not? If they are more visible in your personal life, why might this be the case? Which strengths are clear and which ones are less visible? How might you imagine these strengths showing up in your professional practice? Who might support your strengths becoming more visible and less marginalized?

These three steps comprise a cultivation of strengths, from assessment and reflection, to appreciative dialogue and, ultimately, to cultivation and future practice. Some comments from participants about this practice include:

“The discovery of my Self and that of others restores confidence ... I have renewed strength...I am more aware of how my strengths are the core of who I am and how they are present in my personal and professional life. I am excited to take this information along with my love of learning, curiosity, and creativity ...this was a life affirming experience.”

“I spent some time reflecting on the comment about perseverance. In my presentation, I said that even though perseverance is my number one signature strength, I have an ambiguous relationship with perseverance. I think this is because I have sometimes felt that I have sacrificed such attributes as playfulness, joy of the moment, and creativity for the sake of perseverance and concentrating on long-term goals. I really appreciated the message that I will take with me - to try to nurture qualities of self-confidence and playfulness in my personal life, in my work, and in my new role of supervisor. I think being more playful in all these areas will allow me to take more risks and not be stuck in the idea of having to be perfect.”

“I feel I worked hard to take ownership of my strengths and speak with a voice which invites others to risk living from a strength-based perspective. My understanding of such a worldview is not to deny one’s limitations and fears, but rather to place all in a balanced perspective of self and others. I have recognized my strengths as a nurturer, a creative thinker, an empathic listener, a respectful colleague and a curious traveler.”

“Positive thinking in my relationships as a supervisor or a friend help nurture in me capacities for compassion, hope, courage, perseverance, and wisdom. I like to think of it as surviving hopelessness, and in doing so I invite my co-workers and clients to dare to risk the same.”

“It was incredibly rich to see the ways in which our discussion evolved to produce hypotheses with which to consider the leadership dynamic, such as

personal histories, consideration of social class dynamic, or emerging professional identities. It is within this dimension of discussion that I saw my strengths of creativity, curiosity in the world, and fairness, equity, and justice exhibited.”

This paper presents an organizational process called reflective appreciative practice (RAP). This process honors the reflective capacity of individuals and the power of an appreciative audience. The potential of one’s character strengths are cultivated through telling your narrative and appreciative feedback from the community. When the story is heard from an appreciative perspective, one listens for what works, motivates, gives hope, empowers, and inspires change. Our focus on a shared reflection and appreciation of strengths provides an opportunity for turning potential strengths into professional skills and encourages appropriate risk taking and facilitates growth. We have found that reflective appreciative practice cultivates strengths in individuals, facilitates the embodiment of these strengths in professional relationships, and propels communities into positive future directions.

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Claire Fialkov, Ph.D. (Claire@appreciativeaction.com) and David Haddad, Ed.D. (David@appreciativeaction.com) are founders of Appreciative Action (www.appreciativeaction.com) a consultation practice that strengthens the capacity of organizations dedicated to creating a healthier and more civil world community. Appreciative Action clients include: non-governmental organizations (NGO's), international humanitarian agencies, educational institutions, healthcare agencies, and local community-based groups. Their work involves the assessment of leadership strengths, team building, strategic planning, educational training, and program evaluation. They will be presenting about this model at: The World Appreciative Inquiry Conference (WAIC 2012) in Ghent, Belgium in April 2012 and at Cultivating Strengths through Appreciative Inquiry in Boston, Massachusetts from June 29-30 2012.

