

Brief Encounters with The Taos Institute

This month Dan Saint as he shares a story of Relational and Appreciative Leadership...



Relational and Appreciative Leadership

By Dan Saint

Leading takes courage: to confidently trust in yourself and others and to embrace ambiguity. The promise of social constructionism provides that courage. In social construction, there is an awareness that we as humans are in relationship through language and this creates our future. In relationship we exist and as we deepen our relationships and our belief in others, so we deepen our belief in ourselves.

Melody Bianchetto is the CFO of the University of Virginia. As is common in higher education, structural reorganizations aligned new departments under her. Following reorganization was the predictable chaos, confusion and agony of organizational change.

As a leader, Melody needed to unite the new UVAFinance team to work toward a collective, positive future. In this modern high-service environment, not only subordinate leaders, but every person needed to understand how their behavior led to serving their clients. They needed to share a vision that could inspire the action of much of the administrative and financial infrastructure supporting the students, faculty and staff of UVA. This included establishing the learning, control and compliance framework needed for this organization that housed departments responsible for disparate functions from student financial services to procurement for the university founded by Thomas Jefferson with an operating budget over \$1.5 billion. Simply, UVAFinance needed a strategic plan.

Here is where the trust of oneself, others and embracing ambiguity enters the story. Instead of pulling together a small team of smart people and strategy consultants to develop a top-down strategic plan to be cascaded down through some change management process, Melody and her team boldly chose to tap into the collective brilliance, commitment and passion of the entire organization using Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Paradoxically, choosing the traditional route of advice of experts seems safer: it gives a built in excuse when failure occurs. Unfortunately, it is also the least likely path to success.

Melody began with a planning session including chief of staff Disha Venkatesen and Dan Saint from the Center for Appreciative Practice at UVA. They discussed possibilities and sketched out an inclusive, high-level ambitious design to cover the following three months. The process was to involve the whole system and proceed in three phases of Appreciating, Imagining and Realizing (AIR). The work began with pulling together a project team of about 12 employees representing the different groups in the organization and sending an invitation to about 250 employees and stakeholders to initiate the AI process in early January of 2016.

Melody's invitation set out a surprising goal for the strategic planning process--to build new or deepen existing relationships in the organization. This was an insightful and courageous act for a CFO, but logical. If we co-create our future in relationship, that seems a higher leverage area of focus than starting with the numbers. This awareness was maintained throughout the next three months as the plan was written. Over 20 communications went to the employees and stakeholders guiding them through the process and maintaining close connection.

The phases of AIR proceeded over the next few months and engaged all employees and stakeholders in various configurations. The AI process moved from completing the strategic plan to executing. Four engaged teams emerged and are working actively to transform the organization. The teams have taken the initiative to improve collaboration, service excellence and employee engagement.

Not everything went smoothly. Some employees expressed resistance suggesting it was the job of the leader to develop strategy. Melody calmly took these concerns in stride, continuously communicating and extending the invitation to work relationally. It did help also to do some benchmarking with a generous Carnegie-Melon University who had undergone a similar process about a year earlier.

Using AI did lead to some exciting stories of relationship. Two people who had worked in the same building on the same floor in different departments for over 25 years, met for the first time. Many members of UVAFinance have been in the organization for quite a few years, some even over 40 years and one over 50 years. Many said this was the first time they had been asked to contribute. By literally engaging these long-term employees the organization creates a deeper sense of connection and benefits from the wisdom and energy previously untapped.

Melody displayed courage and wisdom in leading her team. She showed that no matter how brilliant or energetic any one leader may be, the leader who can engage the collective wisdom and energy of her whole team increases potential positive outcomes exponentially. Instead of a more traditional path of strategic planning and vision setting by the leader and a small group, she invited the entire organization to participate. She focused on the relational not the financial. With AI, the whole system contributed to the development with the execution being nearly simultaneous. But in retrospect, why would a leader act any differently?

The August 2016 Issue of the [AI Practitioner](http://aipractitioner.com) is focused on [Leadership in the Appreciative Paradigm](http://aipractitioner.com)

The screenshot shows the homepage of the AI Practitioner website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with social media icons (Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook) and links for 'About us', 'Contact', 'Contribute', and 'My account'. The main header features the AI Practitioner logo and the text 'International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry'. Below the header, there are links for 'Home', 'Subscriptions', 'Issues', 'Articles', 'Blogs', and 'Calendar'. The main content area is titled 'FEATURED ARTICLES' and contains two article previews. The first article is 'Using Quantum Storytelling to Bridge Appreciative Inquiry to Socio-Economic Approach to Intervention Research' by Daniel K Saint, dated August 2016. The second article is 'He's Doing Less and He's Proud of It: A Conversation with Mirko Opdam and his Colleagues About Appreciative Leadership' by Daniel K Saint, dated August 2016. To the right of the featured articles, there is a 'Subscribe and receive 4 issues each year' promotion, with a 'Subscribe' button and the text 'From €39,- per year' and 'Why subscribe?'.

Recently Joep de Jong and Dan Saint finished co-editing the August Issue of the AI Practitioner with the subject of Leadership in the Appreciative Paradigm. The process of writing together was very much an act of relational leading; it was very much a dance. For Joep and Dan, the dance is a good metaphor for leading with social constructionist principles. The dance is an act of connecting and trusting. It requires both dancers to listen - to pay real attention to the other - and to pay attention to the rhythm, even before the first step was taken. The dance and the dancers only exist in the moment of relationship. Neither follow nor lead is privileged. Both are equally necessary.

Although geographically one was writing from a lake in Amsterdam and the other from a lake in North Carolina, there was little separation between them. They invite you to read the August Issue of AIP at <https://aipractitioner.com/> and they also invite you view Joep's series of short film portraits of leaders at <https://vimeo.com/user5077072>

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