

February 2020

Volume 22 Number 1

ISBN 978-1-907549-42-7

 dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-42-7

AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



The Open Issue

Edited by

Lindsey N. Godwin, Luc Verheijen, Saskia Tjepkema and Shelagh Aitken

Co-publishers

**The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and
Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company**

Cover photo courtesy of CLE Rising and Ganesh Kumaraswamy



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Appreciating Before Assessing

The True Sign of Respect in Coaching and Leader Development

Assessment has an important place in leader development, given that it creates the necessary disequilibrium to motivate change. However, assessment without appreciation, a form of emotional nurturance, can leave learners diffident. In this article, Ganesh Chella shares how assessment when preceded by discovery of an individual's positive core using the principles of AI can be powerful in engendering acceptance and change.

CFI is India's leading institution for Coaching and Leadership Development. We have, over the last thirteen years, trained and certified a cadre of over 200 coaches through our Post-Graduate Program in Executive Coaching and also offered a range of coaching-based leadership development solutions to a large base of clients, leveraging our certified coach talent pool.

Drawing on our experience of shaping these practices and programs, this article focuses on some of our efforts in helping our coaches embrace an appreciative approach to engaging with, understanding and helping their coachees, and making our coaching solutions more humanistic, positive and appreciative. But first, my coaching experience with Raj – an experience that provoked me to rethink assessment.

Coaching Raj

Many years ago, I was invited by a very successful entrepreneur, Raj¹, to work with him in a coaching relationship. Raj had built a unique and innovative business from scratch and was looking for help to enhance his leadership effectiveness.

¹ Name changed.



Coaching conversations

I spent my first session listening to Raj and his needs and background. By the end of this meeting, I had broached the subject of his participating in a 360-degree feedback process. He agreed and shared the names of people I could speak to. I embarked on the exercise in earnest and gathered a lot of rich insights about Raj.

I spent an entire session presenting the 360-degree findings to him. They included a fair number of strengths, but a lot of strong feedback about his style of leadership too. That was the last time I met him as a coach. Raj informed me politely that he was now preoccupied with something else. I spent several months thinking about what had gone wrong when technically I had done all the right things.

Thanks to my work with AI as a change methodology, I soon found answers to this mystery. Here is what I discovered:

Raj grew up in a family of very limited means and was the first to go to college, let alone go to the US. He returned to India and built an innovative and profitable business which attracted investors from around the world. He had achieved a lot, deployed several strengths and, above all, put his core as a person to use to get as far as he had.

As an entrepreneur who was alone in his journey, Raj had expected that I would first listen to his story before listening to others' versions. He was hoping that I would appreciate and celebrate who he was, his high points, his life-giving forces and all his dreams and his abilities. He was hoping that I would appreciate his potential and his many gifts and share his optimism about the future before I searched for his flaws or look for what others had to say.

By being somewhat cursory in listening to his story and jumping to listening to what others had to say about him, he did not experience trust and a sense of safety. I had also overlooked the possibility that in telling me his story he could have been helped to talk about his dreams as a leader as well as his wishes for development. Maybe I underestimated that possibility.

Raj taught me the importance of appreciation before assessment.

The propensity to over-assess

The field of medicine is often accused of over-diagnosing – making people “patients” unnecessarily.

Coaches run the risk of being quick to label leaders.

I am inclined to believe that the field of leader development is often guilty of this. Given the plethora of tools at our disposal, coaches run the risk of being quick to label leaders, and find it easy to list all that is wrong. In fact, many executive coaches are offered access to a plethora of assessment reports about their coachees by the HR department, well before they meet the coachee.

Such assessments are perhaps undertaken with the hope that these will lead to change and development. On the other hand, we find executives somewhat cynical about these assessments and their value. (Notwithstanding the fact that these assessment tools by themselves are good and score high on reliability and validity.)

So why do organisations assess? For two purposes – to take decisions on whom they should invest in for development or whom they consider talented, and to ascertain their development needs.

Executive coaches are also guilty of jumping the gun. Given the time-bound nature of an executive coaching engagement, coaches are keen and even anxious to search quickly for “areas for improvement” by almost mechanically embarking on a 360 or some other form of assessment so that they can arrive at goals and then support the coachee’s action toward those goals.

Assessment is important

I must hasten to add that assessment is important in leader development. According to the Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development (Cynthia D McCauley and Ellen Van Velsor), assessment is important because it gives people an understanding of where they are now: current strengths, current performance or leader effectiveness and primary development needs.

The handbook of course places an equal emphasis on another ingredient of developmental experiences: Support.

It maintains that, while challenge provides the disequilibrium needed to motivate people to change, support elements in an experience will send out the message that people will find safety and a new equilibrium on the other side of change.

Unfortunately, the way organisational systems are designed, these two do not go hand-in-hand. Those in charge of driving assessments see their job as delivering assessment data. Support comes, if at all, much later.



Assessment

Every strength contributes to a success.

M. L. Chakraborty,
CFI coach

There is then another challenge. For most of us, the word assessment automatically sound like “negative feedback” or “problems with me” or “what I must work on”. We are tuned to discount any positive elements in assessment data or see it as a social nicety before the real stuff is delivered.

It is for these reasons that we need a new approach, where the positives and the enduring core are discovered and surfaced, and owned by the individuals themselves. That way the ownership of what is strong is as high as ownership for what could be better.

It is in this context that I was keen to bring a much more humanistic, positive approach to the coaching and leadership practice within CFI.

Starting our journey with character strengths

I found that the appreciative approach immediately fosters a positive and optimistic outlook because it looks at what is going right and possibilities.

V. J. Rao, CFI coach

A few years ago, we took the first step in this direction by encouraging our coaches to use the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) tool. The fact that Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman chose to operationalise their *Character Strengths and Virtues Handbook* as a counterpart to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* used in traditional psychology appealed to us. The fact that the VIA inventory spoke the language of strengths and moved from “what’s wrong” to “what’s strong” and was also based on the premise that good character can be built encouraged us.

More and more of our coaches are now enthused about using the VIA tool early on in the engagement so that their relationship starts with conversations around strengths. What is exciting is the fact that when coachees do receive feedback from other assessment sources, they are able to see connections and, more importantly, they are able to see how they can use their signature strengths to work on their developmental goals.

The birth of ADD (Appreciative Discovery Dialogue)

More recently, we took the first big step of integrating the AI principles into the coaching process. We made a beginning with one of our coaching-based leadership development programs – LEAD.² LEAD helps young leaders become self-aware through a battery of assessment tools including VIA and 360,

² When LEAD was launched, the acronym stood for Leadership Effectiveness through Assessment and Development Planning. Subsequently, the program has become so broad-based that it is now simply called LEAD. (Just like IBM is no longer International Business Machines!) LEAD is a young leaders program – typically for first-time leaders.

The persistent focus of this approach on the coachee's 'Positive Core' stands out in a world that tends to look at what's wrong or what's not working.

Chaitanya Nadkarni,
CFI coach

and then on that basis draw up their development goals. They then have the opportunity to implement those goals with the support of a coach. While we did use VIA, we felt the critical need for an appreciative approach in shaping our coaching conversations. That is how the idea of Appreciative Discovery Dialogue was born.

The idea was to engage with young leaders in an appreciative conversation to discover their current context and its alignment to their larger purpose, their strengths, past successes, progressive changes made, their dreams and developmental wishes.

We created an AI-based discovery interview guide and then trained a team of coaches to engage in these appreciative conversations and prepare reports.

In a typical LEAD program, the ADD is the first contact and engagement with the coachee. The ADD interview process takes about ninety minutes. The coachees receive in advance a list of themes that will be discussed with them so they can organise their thoughts.

The discovery dialogue guide includes the core AI questions as well as questions around the leadership competencies relevant for the leader in his or her context. After the interview, coaches capture and file a detailed report with coachees, for whom the report is almost like seeing the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle falling into place, promoting enormous concreteness and faith in themselves. They may never have seen or told their stories in this manner.

We have so far had close to sixty ADDs and are beginning to receive great feedback from our coaches and coachees. The coaches find the positive approach very energising and trust-enabling. They also find the coachees energised.

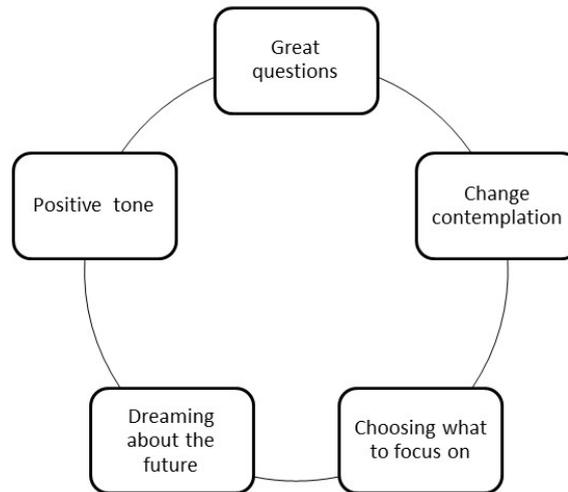
The five AI principles at play in the ADD

ADD enables the coachee to approach the coaching engagement positively.

S. Parameswaran,
CFI coach

The five principles that moved AI from theory to practice can be seen fully at play in the ADD process. The kinds of questions that the coach asks shape not just the conversation but also the relationship and faith in coaching as a helping relationship. The very moment the coach asks the question, the coachee begins to contemplate the possibilities that change can have for him or her. Starting the relationship by focusing on great stories about the successful past paves the way for some deep connections and a sense of hope in the future.

ADD using AI



The dream question fuels a powerful and positive image about the future, on the strength of the successful past. The sense that there is so much more to do and accomplish, and that the image of the future is so positive, is empowering.

When coachees come back from their journey into the past to the present moment, they bring back such gems about themselves.

Sharada Chandrashekar,
CFI coach

An instrument called the *Helping Relationship Inventory*, developed by John E. Jones from the *Aptness of Response Section of Counseling Procedures Pre-test*, was published in E. H. Porter's *An Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling*.

Research using this instrument suggests that when counsellors respond to the client with understanding, the level of trust and connection between them increases, and the client is encouraged to share more, whereas when the response to the client is evaluative, the client does not feel encouraged to share. Positivity is very powerful in a helping relationship.

The way forward

Our early efforts have solidified our resolve to focus on what is working and what is strong, and to avoid labelling leaders or fit them into buckets. I must add that I am by no means undervaluing the importance of other assessment tools. They certainly do have their place and serve an important purpose. However, they signify a certain kind of “challenge” to the coachee. Such a challenge must be preceded by “assurance, respect and regard”, and that comes for an appreciative approach.

In the language of AI, if we want our coachees to walk into the unknown and uncertain world of the future as better leaders, it is important that we help them



Appreciating before assessing

carry along pleasurable, positive and endearing parts of the past. It is important for us as coaches to believe not just in potential but also in what is present already, the seeds of greatness.

Given this philosophical orientation, Appreciative Discovery Dialogue marks a huge shift in the right direction.

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