

Leadership in Appreciative Inquiry

‘Every organisation
needs a
positive revolution’

BY SASKIA TJEPKEMA

With this strong statement - a variation on the great Thomas Jefferson quote - renowned AI consultant and author Diana Whitney opens her keynote. She explains: ‘In an era where we need co-creativity, Appreciative Inquiry just fits very well. Leaders nowadays worry about questions like: ‘How do I engage our people? And our customers?’, ‘How do I build bridges?’ AI helps with exactly those questions.’



Diana Whitney



A quote from one of my teachers that I always remembered is: 'Learn to live and work in the energetically positive. Understand and do what gives life to the people.' And that to me is exactly what AI is about: we focus on those things that enhance energy, vitality, wellbeing to a system.' Leadership is very important to the AI process. To Diana, 'Leadership is a story of why things happen, (or not)... It is not about a person.' She has the audience reflect on leadership in AI processes and key elements that characterized it. After a few minutes of buzzing, she collects some of the words. 'Letting go of egos, trust, *being* AI, ...' She embraces the words that the audience comes up with: 'It is important to continually enrich our vocabulary of leadership.'

Diana and her colleagues have done research into the behaviour of leaders of successful AI initiatives. They found four common denominators:

1. Leaders engage with other members of their organisation or community to create a better way. With being a key word here...
2. People are surprised by their own learning and changing in the process. Diana; 'They typically say: I thought it would change the people. I never thought that I would learn so much myself!'
3. They care for people, profit and planet.
4. Leaders practice and believe in the power of positive attitudes, emotions, intentions and images. To illustrate, Diana shares a story of a father who taught his daughter how to drive, by constantly using positive image: 'Now is a good time to move your car to the middle of the lane.' (instead of: 'get away from the curb!')

She captures it in a nutshell: 'To me, appreciative leadership is the relational capacity to unleash the creative potential of a group and turn it into a positive power, by which you make a difference in the world.'

Leadership of an AI process requires several capabilities. I'll list a few highlights here.

Perhaps first and foremost: the *wisdom of inquiry*. Diana: 'Powerful questions set the process in motion. Typically, those are questions that are value based: what do you value and want to see more of in this organisation or our world.'

The genius of inclusion is equally important. As a rule of thumb Diana indicates: 'Everyone whose future it concerns,

needs to have a voice in creating that future.' Leadership means including those people. Even if that creates challenges. She relates of an AI summit for a school of deaf and blind children, where not only the teachers, parents, support staff, local politicians, but also guide dogs and sign interpreters were all involved. And leaves the audience with a question to ponder: 'Have you included everyone? Who are the voiceless and invisible in your organisation and community? And how can you invite them in the process?'

Focusing on strengths

is another trait she explores. Stressing the advice to keep it relational. 'If you use tests, like the VIA or strengthsfinder, they work excellently to provide language. If people then talk about those strengths together, relate it to actual situations and stories, and look at each other's strengths, the constructive process flows... Otherwise, such test results are just 'labels.' Her encouragement is to work on discovering strengths in small-scale interviews. Inviting everyone to become a talent-spotter, using their own words.

She calls it the art of *illumination*. 'Through what lens do we look at people and events? Are we generous in interpreting what we see? Do we do 'positive gossip'? And look at things through a lens of awe and wonder?' If we do, Diana contends, opportunities increase and positive emotions and comments flourish.

A final one to point out is the importance of *integrity*. 'Leadership is making decisions that serve the greater whole. It is not about you as an individual, or even a group. How do your actions benefit the greater system? Everything is interrelated. Working from that kind of consciousness is essential to appreciative leadership.'

And so, whom should take this list to heart? Only the project leaders or the CEOs of this world? To Diana, quite the opposite: 'everyone has an influence, so we are all leaders.'

A message well picked up by the audience. Even though it was the end of the day, the people in the large room were brimming with energy. A tweet from @JokevA sums it up nicely: 'AI leadership = understand and do what gives life to the people.'

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Video presentation Diana Whitney 