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Appreciative Intelligence

Seeing the Mighty Oak in the Acorn

By Tojo Thatchenkery and Carol Metzker

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Introduction

Appreciative Intelligence is the ability to perceive the positive inherent generative potential within the present. Put in a simple way, Appreciative Intelligence is the ability to see the mighty oak in the acorn.

Charles Pellerin, the former director of NASA's astrophysics division, displayed Appreciative Intelligence when a flawed mirror sent blurred images from the Hubble Space Telescope. Instead of viewing that as a failed mission, he reframed the situation as a project that wasn't yet completed. He found a solution and gained the funding to implement it.

In 1979, Rotarians, led by their president, Clem Renouf, decided to devote themselves to eradicating polio in the world. Instead of viewing it as a medical problem, they reframed it as an organizational challenge. They focused on Rotarians' organizational skills, leadership, talents and resources as the key to a solution. They saw a positive solution — a world without polio — and envisioned a string of managerial decisions and organizational operations to achieve it.

Appreciative Intelligence is the ability that allows people like those to take new or challenging circumstances and turn them into golden opportunities and enriching experiences.

Appreciative Intelligence has three components:

- Reframing.
- Appreciating the positive.
- Seeing how the future unfolds from the present.

Reframing

The first component is the ability to perceive — to see and interpret, to frame or reframe. Framing is the psychological process whereby a person intentionally views or puts into a certain perspective any object, person, context or scenario. One of the most common examples of framing is that of calling a glass half-empty or half-full. Regardless of how the glass is described, the amount of water is the same — only the perspective is different.

In any act of perception or reframing, a person is faced with a series of choices. He or she chooses to pay attention to one stimulus and, at least for the time being, to ignore the remaining stimuli. The decision is a judgment call, value-based in the sense that what gets focused on must have more value than what doesn't.

Using Appreciative Intelligence, the person consciously or unconsciously reframes what's in the present, thereby shifting to a new view of reality that leads to a new outcome, just as the Rotarians reframed polio eradication as an organizational, not medical, challenge. An editor with high Appreciative Intelligence can see the potential of a good book under a new line of literature in a few, short unpolished chapters of a manuscript.

By framing reality in a new and positive way, people open their minds to seeing new connections between ideas, people or situations. When they suddenly see connections that previously eluded

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them, they're said to have a flash of insight, according to researcher John Kounios of Drexel University.

Insight helps leaders find successful solutions to challenges and difficult situations. It helps them address problems, discover hidden talent and invent new products. Many people interviewed for the study into developing the concept of Appreciative Intelligence said that solutions came to them through insight, or described moments like Archimedes' "Eureka," when he stepped into the bath and realized in a flash of inspiration how to determine the density and composition of a crown.

Charles Pellerin, who found the solution to the Hubble's flawed mirrors, said, "Get clear about the outcome and the path will show up." Solutions were already there, but the insight allowed him to see them. "Focus your mind and the answer will appear," he added.

How do you find the insight? Some people talk of letting their subconscious do the work. Research shows that people can (and do) deliberately prepare their brains to come up with creative answers or solutions. This suggests that while some people, perhaps those with high Appreciative Intelligence, have a predisposition to prepare to find an answer through insight, others can find techniques that may help them do so. Research also shows that positive emotional states and the ability to make intuitive judgments are linked. A positive perspective makes a difference in flexible problem-solving.

It must be stressed, however, that Appreciative Intelligence isn't about seeing the world through rose-colored glasses. People with Appreciative Intelligence reframe a situation to see what's positive, but they don't deny that negative aspects or destructive possibilities exist.

They don't bubble over with happiness all the time, but have a normal range of emotions. Their dreams and expectations are very high, but not ungrounded. They don't try to create solutions through "pie in the sky" ideas. They see the oak, not a tropical mango, in the acorn.

Appreciating the Positive

The second component of Appreciative Intelligence is appreciating the positive. Through reframing, leaders and entrepreneurs see and select aspects of the present that are useful, valuable or desirable. They focus on positive aspects of a current situation that can generate a successful future.



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A culture of appreciatively framing others' ideas into possibilities leads to more original and more rapidly generated concepts and discoveries than does one of pointing out gaps or deficiencies. Research suggests the possibility of an appreciative system in which people with higher levels of Appreciative Intelligence are able to frame everyday events into great possibilities. Such individuals, over time, become more mindful in their behavioral patterns and begin to see more and more opportunities and generative possibilities in everyday encounters.

People with Appreciative Intelligence don't limit their ability to see what's positive to reframing situations or products. For many, Appreciative Intelligence is exhibited in a capacity to see other people and their talents in a unique way. Their ability to perceive, make connections and have insights about people around them results in revealing hidden talents or exposing the best in others. Ultimately, leaders with Appreciative Intelligence are able to bring out the best in people because that's what they see.

Appreciating the positive — focusing on the aspect of the oak that's healthy and thriving, not what's withering or unable to grow — is a vital component of Appreciative Intelligence. It clarifies that Appreciative Intelligence doesn't mean reframing to see what's negative or to move backward through destruction. When we see what's valuable, constructive or wonderful in the present, we open the door wide for a positive future.

Seeing How the Future Unfolds

People with high Appreciative Intelligence see how the future unfolds from the present. Many people have the ability to reframe and the capacity to appreciate the

positive. Yet if they don't see the concrete ways that the possibilities of the present moment could be channeled, they haven't developed their Appreciative Intelligence.

Coca-Cola's Asa Candler saw the potential for a top-selling soft drink in a failing headache remedy. He reframed the product as a beverage instead of a health product, focused on proving its great taste to people, and set in motion what became a multibillion-dollar business.

The story is told of how cosmetic company founder Estee Lauder saw a shoeless woman entering an upscale store as a possible customer, and ended up selling two of each cosmetic product to her and more to her relatives the next day. Lauder saw beyond the woman's outward appearance and reframed her as a potential customer, rather than a poor visitor to the store. This created a vastly different sales transaction than would have occurred if Lauder had listened to the employee who suggested ignoring her.

At W.L. Gore & Associates, founder Bill Gore sparked the idea for Glide Floss, shred-resistant dental floss, when he attached a ribbon of Gore-Tex fabric to his toothbrush and began to floss his teeth. Dave Myers, one of the company's employees, had a flash of insight that led to Elixir guitar strings after coating his mountain bike's gear cables with a thin layer of slick plastic material. By reframing the uses of its plastic materials, seeing the positive value in its products and people, and connecting technology and materials possible in the present with the vision of better products for the future, the company has enjoyed a long tradition of bringing original products to the market.

People with Appreciative Intelligence understand the environment around them and respond to it. But they also believe that the environment isn't just something "out there" — it's also created by their imagination and actions. People with Appreciative Intelligence believe they have a great deal of control in determining what environment they're in or will deal with — a conviction that action matters.

They understand connections between themselves and the world around them. They see the circular process of their actions affecting people and situations around them and, in turn, their surroundings driving their actions as well.

Imagination is an important ingredient in seeing how the future unfolds. Innovation can result from applying the imagination of a child to the knowledge and

awareness of an adult. One individual interviewed in the Appreciative Intelligence research described the process as "zooming around mentally," or seeing something new in one place and pretending that the trend or product was fully adopted in another place.

By weaving together knowledge about the environment and imagination, people with Appreciative Intelligence see a different future than others do. By actively experimenting and interacting with the environment they create new possibilities. They connect capabilities of today and the dreams of tomorrow by seeing the steps that make the former become the latter.

The Four Qualities

The ability to reframe, appreciate the positive and see how the future unfolds from the present leads those with Appreciative Intelligence to display four qualities:

- **Persistence.** Because they can see their end goal is possible, they're willing to persist. Persistence is influenced by the self-esteem of individuals. Overall, people with high self-esteem have a greater tendency to persist in the face of failure and obstacles. They're also more likely to see the presence of alternatives, even when faced with failure. So while people with high Appreciative Intelligence persist longer than those with low Appreciative Intelligence, they don't persist indefinitely. They know when to quit and look for alternatives.
- **Conviction that one's actions matter.** Because they can see the end goal, they also believe their actions and abilities will take them to a successful conclusion. This quality is known as self-efficacy. People with strong self-efficacy take on more challenging



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tasks, increase their efforts if they think they might fail, and recover quickly after unexpected failure. Furthermore, if individuals with strong conviction in their abilities fail, they assume they failed because they didn't try hard enough or didn't have the relevant knowledge. So in further attempts, they try harder after acquiring the knowledge they believe is necessary for success.

- **Tolerance for uncertainty.** Because people with Appreciative Intelligence can envision the way a positive future could unfold from the present, they can deal with the uncertainty that often accompanies a new venture, product development or crisis. The study of Appreciative Intelligence in leaders, inventors and innovators revealed evidence of high tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity and cognitive dissonance — the psychological term that refers to the discomfort people feel when new ideas or experiences seem to contradict what they already know or believe. While for many people the feeling of being “up in the air” is so difficult that they'd rather deal with a negative conclusion than not know whether the ending will be positive or negative, the leaders studied appeared to suspend those feelings of discomfort.

- **Irrepressible resilience.** People with Appreciative Intelligence exhibit irrepressible resilience — the ability to bounce back from a difficult situation — as a result of reframing, seeing what was positive in the situation, and understanding that a better future could come about despite a crisis or setback. They perceive that a positive consequence could be built even from the most drastic or devastating circumstances. Irrepressible resilience is more than persistence: it's the quality some leaders have to bounce back higher from challenges than the place where they began.

Conclusion

The most effective and successful people exhibit the ability to reframe, appreciate the positive and see how the future unfolds from the present. They have Appreciative Intelligence, the ability to see the mighty oak in the acorn. **e**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Tojo Thatchenkery is a professor of organizational learning at George Mason University. Carol Metzker has a master's degree in organizational learning from George Mason University and more than 15 years' experience in communications and corporate environments.

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