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Adaptable Leadership

A Strengths-based Approach to
Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices

Wendy Campbell
Anne Radford

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Inside this issue

Welcome to February 2014 issue of AI Practitioner

In this issue, *Adaptable Leadership: A Strengths-based Approach to Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices*, you will find nine articles exploring the challenges facing adaptable leaders navigating complexity by choosing to look at their challenging situations honestly and appreciatively.

Enrique J. Zaldivar's Feature Choice article "Authenticity and Accountability: Key

to An Appreciative Stance to Adaptable Leadership" combines AI and multicultural competency principles, emphasizing the importance of discovering our unique cultural lens for effective leadership.

Research Notes presents a review of an earlier AI Practitioner issue, *Appreciative Inquiry in Asia*. We hope it will inspire many to read the August 2013 issue anew or offer their own review of previous issues.

Newly published resources as well as the classics on leadership have been brought together in AI Resources by the new editorial team.

All good wishes as we start a new subscription year!

Anne Radford
Editor, AI Practitioner

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A Strengths-based Approach to Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices

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Culture Change and Strategic Conversations

Adaptive Leadership in Action

When a new CEO of a not-for-profit, regional health network took the helm, he engaged the whole system in a transformative strategic planning process. He believed that when colleagues are at their best, they bring out the best in others and make the mission of the health network possible every day, even during times of unprecedented change. This article describes highpoints of the initial stage of the strategic planning process, Mission Possible.

In late 2010, the newly appointed CEO of a regional health network set out to engage the whole system in a transformative strategic planning process titled "Mission Possible".

Under this CEO's adaptive leadership, example and humble inquiry, colleagues simultaneously designed the change while positively transforming themselves, their relationships, the culture and the strategy. The continually emergent, shared vision also included a description of the conditions necessary for colleagues to be at their best and make the mission possible all the time.

Principles of adaptive leadership

The complexities and pace of the business environment require us to re-imagine leading and organizing. Useem (2010) highlights four leadership precepts that embody the characteristics of adaptive leadership, which are to:

- Create a personal link that strengthens relationships;
- Establish a common purpose to foster focused alignment;
- Make good and timely decisions;
- Provide the strategic framework for others to align objectives and execute.

Leadership involves the capacity to be on the dance floor and the balcony at the same time; that is, being able to observe oneself at the same time as acting in role.

Other qualities and characteristics of adaptive leaders include:

- Learning through experimentation;
- Cultivating a diversity of views to generate multiple options;
- Leading with empathy;
- Rewarding accomplishments with increased autonomy (Boston Consulting Group).

Heifetz (2009) defines adaptive leadership as the capacity to lead and thrive through change. Leadership involves the capacity to be on the dance floor and the balcony at the same time; that is, being able to observe oneself at the same time as acting in role.

At this health network, the CEO was acting in an executive sponsor role while engaging the trusted counsel of his staff; trust was the key of the emerging culture. In partnership with his team from internal staff functions and supported by external consultants, he designed, co-created and facilitated a whole system, SOAR (Stavros et al, 2004) strategic planning process titled Mission Possible.

He continually honored and built on the many robust skill-sets and initiatives already underway. In doing so, he fostered a more agile culture where people supported each other to reframe potentially paralyzing problems and challenges into thoughtful action and rapid-cycle experimentation. The mutual value of relationships and results was elevated, more broadly embraced and appreciated.

An adaptive leader in action

This CEO knew the health network had to be ready for an uncertain future. Given the complexities of health care reform and the radical changes in the economics of health care, agility and engagement were key. In the CEO's view, "It is our culture which is going to keep us successful." In choosing an approach, he wanted a strategic planning process that would "emancipate" people and "make it possible for them to be at their best all the time". The necessary outcomes were: clearly articulated priorities; affirmations of the system's many strengths; and a collaborative culture where people felt even more ownership of the network's mission.

The first step was to bring the SOAR process to the senior leadership retreat and extend the vision of a high-engagement process to senior leaders throughout the health network.

Next, the internal OD team in collaboration with external consultants provided a three-day SOAR training for a group of 40 change agents from multiple staff functions throughout the organization. This multi-disciplinary team staffed the change initiative and benefitted from being part of the change. The team determined who should be on the Mission Possible steering team, intentionally attending to

The story board: 'Tell us a story'



multiple dimensions of diversity. Nearly 80 people representing different departments, levels, disciplines, generations, time with the organization and cultural backgrounds signed on. They met monthly to help plan the next steps of Mission Possible.

The qualities and examples of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 2009, given below) were evident throughout:

Despite having to make changes, the clear commitment from the CEO and the clear strategic focus were essential.

Create a personal link

The strategic process was designed to involve as many people as possible using meetings and events that were already in the schedule. Passion was evident, sparking conversations across professional, structural and personal boundaries. The steering team redesigned the network's employee forums – the annual town hall meetings – to include positive reframing skills and an appreciative inquiry in diverse pairs about what was needed to be at their best. This decision placed thousands of people at the center of the strategic planning process.

Establish a common purpose to foster focused alignment

After the CEO presented information about the health network at the redesigned events, each person was invited to select a partner for a brief conversation guided by the following prompts:

- Tell a story about a time when you were at your best in this health network, and helped make our mission possible.
- What conditions existed to make this possible?
- What do you imagine would make this possible more often for you and others?

Following the paired conversations, the CEO encouraged colleagues to share high points from their stories and to anonymously record conditions needed for them

'Leaders are working more collaboratively across boundaries.'

to be at their best on evaluation forms. The research and evaluation team analyzed the feedback, identified the themes and used them to guide the next phase of the inquiry.

Make good and timely decisions

This transformational strategic planning process was a continually emergent process yet had constancy of purpose and strategic focus. The culture, conversations, relationships and strategy evolved in nearly every moment as people engaged and found even more ways to create the conditions necessary to be at their best and bring out the best in others. Despite having to make changes, the clear commitment from the CEO and the clear strategic focus were essential to the work and inspired experimentation in others.

Provide the strategic framework for others to align objectives and execute

The strategic conversations went viral. Across the system there was evidence of:

- Re-framing opportunities;
- Expanding problem statements to exploring possibilities;
- Valuing storytelling;
- Critical conversations.

The AI process was applied to selected operational, clinical and planning meetings and processes. After learning the appreciative approach, the staff coined the term "inspired Appreciative Inquiry" to convey the team's intention to take the approach and link it to other approaches in the system. As stated by one leader: "The team is laughing more, learning more, and celebrating what's right. They have reduced telling and increased inquiry to engage in better ways to work through challenges. Leaders are working more collaboratively across boundaries."

A quote from the CEO to his staff

Working in health care is physically and emotionally demanding. Yet, you continually demonstrate an unequalled commitment to our patients, their families and our community. You are proficient, resourceful, devoted and compassionate. You strive for perfection and achieve excellence in service of our mission to heal, comfort and care for the people of our community. Throughout our health network and our community, we hear stories like those told during employee forums – a technical partner who sings to help patients relax; a behavioral health colleague who finds an apartment for a wounded veteran; an electrician whose kind words make patients smile. These stories and hundreds of others continually make us proud.

Summary

The CEO emulates the qualities, influences and impact of an adaptive leader. He has the important capability of not only knowing when to be in the balcony and when to be on the dance floor, but also has the capacity of holding the perspective of the observer on the balcony while being on the dance floor.

Special thanks

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