

PART ONE

THE *SMARTER* PARADOX

To be smarter, we need to stop being the expert and start asking more questions.

CHAPTER ONE

IT'S YOU, NOT THEM

Several years ago I was having a crisis of faith. As an entrepreneur, I had just seen my first company crash and burn at the burst of the dot-com bubble. One by one our clients had lost their budgets and ultimately closed their doors. I had recently picked up and moved my life across the country from San Francisco to New York City, and I started to feel like I was missing out on my destiny as a leader. I had few clients, no support group, and a vision of a thriving consultancy that had gone south.

Every day I was working hard to put together a new business plan, establish a new brand on the East Coast, and develop new relationships, but I was uninspired. The ease and creative dynamism with which my first company started just wasn't there. I was struggling. I was convinced I was no longer smart enough, I wasn't fast enough, and I wasn't good enough. I was angry at "them"—the outside forces that were conspiring against me. The economy. The clients who never paid their outstanding bills. The consultant who left. Argh! There had to be a better way. . . .

So I hired an executive coach.

It was the second time I had hired my own private thinking partner. The first was when I started out as an entrepreneur and needed to work with someone who had been there, who could offer support and guidance, who could help me turn an idea into a reality. But this time I needed someone to shake up my thinking, to get me moving again.

The first time I talked to Cynthia, my coach, I was angry at my situation, whining and difficult. I couldn't think my way out of a paper bag. My creative, impassioned, powerful leader self was hidden under

a blanket of disappointment. Through Cynthia's pointed questions, her acknowledgment, and her genuine belief that I could change the way I was doing things, after a few months of coaching I was able to successfully launch a new company and grow and develop that new practice rapidly into a firm vastly more successful than the first. That is the power of coaching: to transform—not just a frustrating situation into a better one, but the very concept of what it means to lead.

As a coach and leader of an executive coaching company, I am passionate about the power of the coaching relationship. I have worked with many types of leaders: CEOs of global companies, engineers who didn't trust anything without an off switch, young managers who hadn't had to get anything done through other people before, and HR leaders who ran leadership programs. Through all those experiences, the one common thread that exists in every case is that the *leaders* themselves—the coachees—are the ones who do the work and transform themselves. The coach serves as a facilitator, sounding board, and consistent supporter.

The great executive coaches are the ones who see the big picture and pay close attention to how the leader, as a unique human being, fits into that picture. We coaches are in the business of *attending*—not like students attending a class, but as professionals who are paid to attend—to pay close and careful attention to our clients and their betterment. We are engaged to question people like you, listen to you, and attend to your responses and thought patterns, all with the goal of forwarding you and your organization. We are enlightened witnesses to the perils and triumphs of leadership. It is that attention that enables magic to happen. And it is with a coaching mind-set that I've written this book.

As your coach, I begin with only one assumption: that you are a leader who wants to be smarter, faster, and better than you are today. Every executive who approaches my consultancy cares about doing a great job. They know that great leaders are always pushing the boundaries of what they know, questioning themselves, trying to do ever-greater things. I believe that self-betterment is part of our human spirit, and that it expands when we take on leadership roles. Sometimes the desire for betterment comes from inside ourselves, and sometimes it comes from others, but either way, it drives us to continuously improve.

WHAT MAKES YOU SMARTER?

When you think about it, the hierarchical leader of the Industrial Age had it easy. There were fixed, clear structures for being in charge. Leaders gave orders and employees took them. (At least that was how it was supposed to work.) The job of the intelligent head of an organization was clear: set the vision and the strategy, and define a clear plan of action for others to execute. But as we enter and move beyond the Information Age, the definition of smart leadership is rapidly transforming. The Information Age has been about accessing, sharing, and manipulating data. Leadership has been about making decisions based on technology and data shifts. Now, we are entering a new age where we need skills and intelligence related to connectedness. We've enacted a huge shift into a globalized, diverse world with greater and greater levels of complexity to address as leaders.

We've begun the shift beyond the Information Age into an Age of Interdependence. It becomes more apparent every day that our personal decisions impact not just our immediate sphere but our entire world. This requires a huge shift in leadership. We can no longer assume that the people we lead are going to be from our same culture. We can no longer assume that our purview involves creating value from a set of products or services. Leaders are expected to see the interwoven strands that make up the webs of our companies and their interaction with markets, consumers, and resources.

Quite simply, being a smarter leader today is no longer about being the one with the MBA or the background in nuclear physics (which makes for a smart business administrator or nuclear physicist, not necessarily a smart leader). With the rapid growth of technology, it is often the case that college interns with great Internet search skills can access key information faster than the most experienced CEOs.

Organizations are requiring new and different skills and talents in their leaders. Leaders need to create and adapt to new levels of complexity. We who lead are now coordinators of complex systems made up of people, technology, economics, communications, and regulations. We need to be flexible and adaptable, to listen carefully to stakeholder needs and demands, and to respond decisively.

We need to be innovative, thoughtful, strategic, and influential. We need to set the vision and strategy for our companies, and define plans of action that can shift and adapt to new scenarios.

We leaders may not even be at the top of an organization any more. In less hierarchical workplaces, leadership is part of many employees' daily lives. We set visions for our teams at every level of the company. We inspire others each day. We make strategic decisions and are empowered to make changes and embrace opportunities as they arise. Leadership is no longer just for CEOs.

As defined in the Introduction, being smarter in today's world involves a paradox: to become smarter, you have to admit what you don't know. Asking questions and tolerating ambiguity are more important than knowing more and more. The more we develop our flexibility and ability to inquire and make connections, the better prepared we are to deal with an ever-more-complex global business environment. As management theorist Peter Drucker said, "The leader of the past was a person who *told*; the leader of the future will be a person who *asks*." That future is now.

Now let's get specific. What exactly can you do to become a smarter leader in today's business environment, which is full of change, populated by diverse people from diverse cultures, and affected by market forces that can change direction on a dime?

- First, cultivate an appreciative personal attitude and mind-set as a leader, which is the focus of this chapter.
- Second, as you will explore in Chapter Two, look at your leadership in the context of your organization, or system.
- Third, apply your leadership knowledge to others and develop smarter people around you. This will be the goal of Chapter Three.

And so we begin by focusing on you as a leader. This first section involves four major concepts: applying the "appreciative eye" to work from the positive, letting go of being the expert, embracing curiosity, and practicing the art of inquiry.

THE APPRECIATIVE EYE

It is no secret that every leader is different. This is why we do not need to become experts on great leadership as much as we each

need to become expert at knowing what makes us each great leaders in our own way.

Therefore, the first step to becoming a smarter leader is to look for the smartest aspects of your existing performance as a leader—what's working—and then build on them to make you even smarter. This is not about studying what *should* work; it is about becoming expert at what *does* work for you and expanding upon it to become as smart a leader as you can be.

This concept can be summarized as applying the “appreciative eye.” It is a simple and powerful perspective to adopt: look to the good first, and build on it. The rule is to first seek answers about what is effective and successful and then work from that point forward. In essence, this is the foundation of an overall positive attitude—seeing the glass half-full, and then looking for opportunities to fill the glass higher.

Let's look at the full definition of *appreciate*:¹

Ap-pre'ci-ate, v.

1. Valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems.
2. To increase in value, e.g. the antique vase has appreciated in value.
Synonyms: Valuing, Prizing, Esteeming, Honoring, Increasing in Value

The appreciative eye involves the perspective of *valuing*—of looking for the awe and inspiration in everything. When we visit a museum we often appreciate a set of paintings for their beauty, for their meaning, or for the value that they can bring us. This is quite different from the way we might, say, look at our overflowing inbox of unprocessed paperwork. But the inbox really can be looked at from the same positive viewpoint. It's better to have a full inbox than to be unemployed, right?

Really think about this concept and the power it has. What if each day you were assured that you would experience satisfaction, discover a new opportunity, and leave your workplace feeling inspired? It is 100 percent possible. This is the gift of using the appreciative eye as a daily practice.

TRY THIS

Activating the Appreciative Eye

To activate the appreciative eye in your own career as a leader, ask yourself these two simple questions whenever you need inspiration:

1. When have I been inspired, excited, or amazed by my work? What are the details of that story? How did I feel physically and mentally? What was the impact on me? What effect did I have on other people around me?
2. What opportunities for inspiration are available to me today?

You can use this exercise whenever you are feeling stuck. Take time to appreciate yourself and you will be much more able to see the positive in other people and situations.

If I answer the questions in this exercise for myself, I am often inspired, excited, or amazed by my work. When I think back to those moments when I've really met a challenge or collaborated with someone in a position of great power to address his or her leadership issues effectively, I remember why I love what I do. When I focus on that feeling's impact on me, I start experiencing it again. It's as if someone has just given me an inspiration shot in the arm, and I remember my own sense of motivation and excitement. I also remember that I have an opportunity today, right now—and that feeling is directly related to what has inspired me in the past.

The concept of applying the appreciative eye to business is borrowed from organizational change gurus David Cooperrider, Ron Fry, and Survesh Shrivastha, along with their colleagues from Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management. They are some of the key thinkers behind a profound new discipline called "Appreciative Inquiry," a discipline that has been used to help whole organizations become inspired, and a concept I explore in detail later in this chapter. The exercises in this section

flow out of their body of work on how organizations can address three areas of strategic advantage: engaging people at every level, increasing the speed of innovation, and creating a magnetic setting for the attraction and retention of exceptional talent.

Throughout this book you will find applications of the appreciative eye, because one of the jobs of a leader is to look at things for their value and to increase their value. As you will see, it is both a perspective and an active leadership tool.

LETTING GO OF THE EXPERT

Many senior managers can't bring themselves to say "I don't know," because it seems to undercut the very reason they hold their position. This unease prevents them from discussing the simple fundamental questions of their business. Asking a basic question like, "Who are our customers?" can seem naive, in fact it is essential. Saying "I don't know" can lead to breakthroughs. Leaders lose their edge and value when they assume too much.

—FROM *HARDBALL*, BY GEORGE STALK AND ROB LACHENAUER

Today's smart leaders know that they cannot be the expert in everything—there is simply too much to know. And sometimes an overemphasis on expertise can get in the way of effective, enduring, and fulfilled leadership.

The expert model of leadership is easy to fall into. Many of us who are successful leaders have been given our positions because of our ability to do something very, very well. Maybe that something is selling cars; maybe it's designing furniture or fundraising for a political cause. We have demonstrated our ability to be in the trenches, solve complex problems, and survive through challenges. And then we are handed the mantle of leadership based on our expertise. But that is where the usefulness of that expertise generally *ends*. Once we cross over into leading others, we have to adopt new strategies to serve us in our new role.

Think about the best boss you've ever worked with. Good bosses are often people with a deep understanding of human nature. They are consistent, trustworthy, and empowering. They honor their people by trusting them, and by giving them the tools they need to succeed. They may very well be expert in their field, but their expertise is not the top reason why their employees

respect them. In fact, it's usually the fact that they believe in accessing the expertise of others that makes them great bosses. This is another aspect of an appreciative approach—valuing the expertise of others in addition to our own.

Executive coach Noah Blumenthal honed his leadership skills as a young manager at a major financial institution. According to Noah, letting go of expertise was critical for his success. “I had to stop being perceived as a know-it-all,” he says.

As a manager, Noah was new to the job and became excited about hiring people and managing a team. The group was extremely busy, and Noah admits he was trying to do too many jobs at one time. He got used to being the person with the answers. When people came and asked questions, he would be the one who would solve the problem, spitting out ideas, solutions, and answers. Noah was running himself ragged.

After burning himself out in the first three months in the role, he came to realize that the questions of his staff were actually mostly things they could address on their own. His team members weren't asking questions because they weren't strong but because he had trained them that he had the answers to everything, and they could come to him with anything and everything. They weren't taking the time to think for themselves, to develop their own leadership and management skills. This created an unsustainable model. Noah realized he was limiting their development, and he wasn't taking advantage of their talent and decision-making capacity. Noah says, “It took a tremendous effort of willpower to not be the expert—to not provide the answers I had in my head, and to discover through that process just how often their answers were even better than my own.” But he did, and he was a much smarter—and less stressed—leader for it. Noah saw that he had to make changes in the way he defined leadership and in the way he thought of himself and his staff.

Another example of successfully losing the expert involves the familiar situation of an executive making the transition from successful salesperson to manager of other salespeople. Oliver, a coaching client, sold magazine advertising until he was promoted into a sales manager position. He needed to soften his aggressive “sales guy” style to succeed as a leader. With coaching, he learned to ask questions about how other salespeople on the team could

be successful rather than forcing his own style on a large group of diverse people. This required a shift from being the expert in selling a product to being a coordinator and elicitor of good thinking in many people.

In another example, Tom, the successful leader of a three-hundred-person company, liked to have ideas in his head before he posed a question to one of his employees. When he sought coaching and realized the importance of losing the expert, he became more open to listening and learning, rather than believing his ideas were always best. Now, if he doesn't hear something new that shifts his thinking, he is still letting his team express themselves, and sometimes that means they think it's all been their idea when really he's known it all along. Tom, a great leader, has learned to become comfortable letting go and not always being right. He is happy to look less smart and ask more questions in the moment so as to help other people find their voice, their ideas, and their footing. Ultimately, of course, this makes him a much smarter—and more respected—leader.

The other temptation of the expert is the temptation of ego. When we are great at something (or when we think we are), we can overwhelm people with our ego—the part of us that takes credit for our successes . . . and the part that makes us arrogant and difficult to be around. No one likes someone who believes everything good is the result of his or her personal input alone, even when it's true. A smart leader knows that *not* taking credit is often the best way to serve the good of the group.

A friend of mine once worked for a very famous corporate executive. She has this to say about working for someone with a great big ego:

Everyone around me thought, "Oh, wow! You're working for so-and-so. That must be amazing! What's he like?" Well, let me tell you. He had a reputation for being a real pain in the you-know-what. Everything was all about him. Every division leader in the company was a power player, but they were eclipsed by his taking credit for all of their hard work.

I could not believe the kinds of things he would say to me. Once, during one of his famous blow-ups, he told me I was too short to be an effective leader. He was really excited to tell stories about

himself and his famous friends. “The President of the United States and I were talking yesterday and . . .” he would say. And it would have nothing to do with anything! Ultimately, this executive is intensely insecure and anyone close to him knows it. Most of the people who work under him end up either becoming a protector of their teams—not letting [the leader] have access to tear them apart—or, they end up ignoring him and his direction because he’s so unpleasant. I think it’s despite himself that he succeeds at all.

Are there instances where demonstrating expertise and ego is still acceptable for leaders? Of course. When you are leading a shareholder meeting, you must be an expert. When you are presenting the keynote address at an industry conference, you must be self-confident. But when you are leading and managing others, you often need to let go of expertise in order to make the best decisions, come up with the most innovative ideas, and evolve into an effective, enduring, and fulfilled leader.

EMBRACING CURIOSITY

When you lose your need to be the expert, you gain something magnificent for leaders and deceptively simple: curiosity. Our natural state as human beings is to be curious about the world around us. Think of young children, who constantly ask questions like “Why is the sky blue?” and “Where did Fluffy go when he died?” When we ask more questions, as adults or children, we gather more information, we see things from new perspectives, and we clarify our beliefs and attitudes. Curiosity helps us learn. It makes us smarter.

How can you as a leader see things in a fresh and new way? Remember back to your childhood. We were not put on this planet to be serious, inflexible, and intolerant. Children have what might be referred to in Buddhism as “beginner’s mind,” a clear, unbiased viewpoint that takes things in without immediate judgment or categorization, a viewpoint that allows them to see things a different way. Beginner’s mind is the backbone of curiosity. If we believe we have all the answers and we know everything, our curiosity disappears, and with it our ability to grow.

Executive coach M. Nora Klaver shares this advice:

Unfortunately, most adults have lost curiosity. Years ago, during an improvisation class, my acting instructor peppered me with a series of questions: What makes me happy? Sad? How do I meet challenges? What do I like about improv? What am I most afraid of? I answered these easily, but then he stumped me with his last question, “When were you last surprised?” I couldn’t remember being surprised by anything or anyone—at least not recently. I was shocked and suddenly curious. Why hadn’t I been surprised?

I think that element of surprise is needed for curiosity. We are so accustomed to believing that we know how things—and people—work. We don’t even bother being curious. We’ve convinced ourselves that people are predictable, that they never change, that a simple methodology is all we need to make things work. We are so wrong.

Great leaders cultivate their curiosity. Why? Curiosity breeds excitement, ideas, and innovation. It is naturally appreciative. When we think we know everything, we lose the most exciting part of ourselves—our curiosity. We become coarse and jaded, and we believe that we are always right. Once our thought patterns are inflexible, we don’t enable ourselves to see clearly and without bias.

When we nurture our curiosity, when we are engaged in seeing all sides of an issue and in gathering new information that will illuminate previously dark corners, we are cultivating a specific quality of mind and humility in our thinking. We begin to question our set viewpoint and to see things outside our narrow band of reference. Lee Bollinger, president of Columbia University, brought words to this concept in his speech to the graduating class of 2005:

It’s easy in this polarized climate to pick a side and become cloistered in one worldview, to the exclusion of all others. You listen to left-wing or right-wing talk radio—not both. You buy a book on Amazon.com and it instantly suggests five books just like it; the interest is not in broadening your tastes, but in reinforcing them. . . . Over the past several years you have been encouraged not to take refuge in your own opinions. We have urged you to see issues from

competing perspectives—to question, to doubt, to resist the allure of certitude.

These words are critical to the curious leader. We must, as part of our discipline of smart thinking, *resist the allure of certitude*, and rely not on our own expertise but on our capacity for reflecting, responding, and questioning.

THE ART OF INQUIRY

Once you have found a comfort level with letting go of the need to be the expert in the room and embracing curiosity, the next step toward smarter leadership is putting your curiosity into action by asking more questions. The act of questioning to gain knowledge is certainly not new. It goes back all the way to ancient Greece and the great teacher Socrates. Socrates used dialectic reasoning—thinking by means of dialogue, debate, argument, and questioning—to uncover the beliefs and best thinking of the people he taught.

Socratic questioning is a method of evoking the knowledge that is already resident in us. It's a method of teaching and learning that depends on a basic faith that people have all the answers within themselves. Socrates also believed that genuine knowledge comes from acknowledging what we *do not* know, that we are not experts, that we must question the dominant thinking of our time and attempt to discover simple truth through asking questions.

Great leaders use this same discipline to learn, to teach, to mobilize, and to shift the mind-set of their organizations. For leaders, asking questions achieves all the following benefits, which contribute to smarter leadership in three ways:

Enabling Better Thinking

- Helps us gather information, including perspectives that are different from our own
- Gives us time to think, by avoiding a jump to rash conclusions
- Focuses us on what is really important
- Defines a powerful platform for decision making, by allowing several angles to be explored

Cultivating Rapport and Relationships

- Develops trust and rapport by showing respect for other people's opinions and ideas
- Demonstrates our willingness to listen and understand
- Empowers employees to achieve

Creating a Smarter Organizational Culture

- Shows us what assumptions we are making as individuals, and as an organization, that might be holding us back from innovation and achievement
- Teaches us to think creatively in all situations, not just during brainstorming sessions
- Creates a feedback-rich culture, which limits hidden agendas, bad morale, and group frustration

I believe that asking questions, or “the art of inquiry,” is among the most powerful tools available to leaders. General Peter Pace, current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says, “If you are looking for answers, ask the question.” What could be simpler?

But as a leader it is not always easy to ask questions, particularly if your organization has a culture that favors aggressive, directive communication. Sometimes the only questions tolerated are challenging ones: *What were you thinking? Are you a moron?* These, of course, are not the kinds of questions it's useful to cultivate.

You will not become a more enduring, effective, and fulfilled leader by asking any old questions, or negative questions like the ones just mentioned. You must be strategic in your use of inquiry, in the questions you ask of those around you, and even more important, in the questions you ask yourself. Again, the best approach is appreciative.

Appreciative Inquiry is the use of solution-focused questioning to create dialogue and learning in individuals and groups. It is a way of looking at an individual, a team, or an organization not as a problem to be solved or a patient to be diagnosed but as a strong, capable whole individual or group with capacities that you do not yet know. In traditional organizational and leadership development, the approach is to look for problems and then solve them.

In Appreciative Inquiry, you look for strengths, for opportunities to grow, and for the creation of what's next.

While this book is not a guide to implementing a formal Appreciative Inquiry initiative in your organization, the wisdom of Appreciative Inquiry is something you can take into your everyday leadership. As an overview, from *The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook* by David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, and Jacqueline M. Stavros, consider this definition of the technique as a method for large-scale change:

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves the discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most effective, alive, and constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. The inquiry is mobilized through the crafting of the “unconditional positive question,” often involving hundreds or even thousands of people. AI interventions focus on the speed of imagination and innovation—instead of the negative, critical and spiraling diagnoses commonly used on organizations.²

A formal Appreciative Inquiry can take many forms, from long-term change initiatives to an “AI Summit”—a convergence of people from across an organization, as many as possible, to collectively approach the following questions around a single topic: What gives life? (Discovery) What might be? (Dream) How can it be? (Design) And What will it be? (Destiny). This four-stage process is called the “4-D Cycle.”

If Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to developing the best in your organization, what are the key differences between AI and the more traditional mode of thinking?

Traditional Problem-Solving Approach

Identify problems
Conduct root cause analysis
Brainstorm solutions and analyze
Develop action plans

Appreciative Inquiry Approach

Appreciate “what is”
Imagine “what might be”
Determine the structure that supports “what should be”
Create “what will be”

It is important to realize that Appreciative Inquiry is a way of thinking and increasing the value of organizations that is the *opposite* of the standard process of focus and analysis in organizational life—problem solving. When we focus on problems, we become masters of problems. When we focus on appreciating the best of what is, leveraging strengths, and looking for opportunities, we become masters of strengths, masters of growth, and masters of opportunity.

For instance, take the question, “How can we gain strategic advantage by attracting and retaining exceptional talent?” Often the first run at this question is to investigate what the blocks are to achievement of this goal. We ask another series of questions: “Why don’t we have the best already? What stops great people from joining us? What are we missing?” The assumption behind those questions is that they will help us focus on a problem and then solve that problem. What this is actually doing is focusing our attention on what is not working.

Appreciative Inquiry is driven by an important assumption: that focusing on what works propels us toward a more positive future state. It is about eliciting great performance rather than demanding it. Questions that might be asked in an Appreciative Inquiry might start with:

- When have we been successful, energized, and engaged as a group?
- What would we like to have happen?
- What would a bright and positive future look like?
- What strengths can we build on?
- How have the organizations we look to as having the best people attracted and retained them?
- How have we attracted our best and brightest in the past?
- What are some big ideas our most successful and satisfied employees have about recruiting and retaining top talent?

Always remember that the key to focusing on the right issue as a leader is beginning with the right question. On a frustrating day, you might be tempted to ask yourself, “How can I survive another day of this?” Instead, start asking, “What can I gain from today? How can I hold on to my appreciative eye?”

The results can not only make you a smarter leader, they can also make a profound difference in your outlook on life and work. Robyn Stratton-Berkessel, founder of LIT Global, says:

In my leadership, Appreciative Inquiry has changed me personally and professionally in ways that I certainly like and that produce results I am proud of. I pay attention to language and choose positive ways of expression over negative ways. I look for the good and what is working, and that comes through with my clients. It gives me great joy in my work, because I see behaviors change and I see beliefs changing. I hear values being identified and articulated. Seeing the world through an appreciative lens allows for greater compassion, and speaking from the heart becomes the norm.

WHAT QUESTIONS DO I NEED TO ASK MYSELF?

Great leaders have the courage to ask the simple questions:

- What does my company need right now?
- What is the biggest value we can create for our customers?
- What steps can I take today toward efficiency, effectiveness, fulfillment?
- What are the opportunities we've got to face tough issues that, if resolved, would change our business for the better?
- What is the truth about our industry?
- How can I be physically, personally connected to my customers, my suppliers, my employees?

One of the most important areas in which leaders can use Appreciative Inquiry is by questioning themselves. Asking questions of yourself does a number of things: it helps you recall information (and goodness knows we all have a lot of things going on at any given moment in our busy minds) and it helps you gain clarity on your ideas, your position, your intentions, and your strengths.

Let's look at an example of Appreciative Inquiry in practice on an individual scale, and see how questions can change a leader's effectiveness. Sarah, a former coaching client, is a PR executive who was feeling frustrated. When we started our coaching together, she said she felt like there was a time limit on her work with her current

TRY THIS

Strengths List

To get in the habit of asking appreciative questions, start by brainstorming your own greatest assets: the attributes, skills, talents, relationships, and resources you possess.

Instructions:

Step 1. Set a timer for five minutes.

Step 2. Write as many strengths as you can in five minutes, with a minimum of twenty-five.

Step 3. When you are finished, ask yourself the following questions:

- What might my best friend or significant other say I should add to my list?
- What is so obvious about me that I forgot to include it?
- What would my coworkers say I should add?
- Are there three more strengths I could add?

Step 4. Review your strengths and answer the following questions:

- How often have you been asked to do this in the past?
- How did it feel to write your strengths?
- Would you be comfortable sharing this list with others?
- How can you use these strengths more this week?
- Is this something you could assign to your direct reports?

organization. Her performance reviews kept getting pushed off. She was supposed to have one in January, then November and beyond. In general, she felt she was not progressing the way she wanted to in the organization. She felt she was at a crossroads—would she stay at her company or look for a new job elsewhere?

I asked her a series of simple, appreciative questions:

- When was she at her best?
- What accomplishments was she proud of?
- Why did she value her contribution?

In addition to answering these questions during coaching, for homework she wrote a list of the accomplishments she was proudest of every day. The act of focusing on positive experiences changed her entire outlook. Her attitude was more positive, and that made a difference to her team. She ended up getting a job offer in the middle of the coaching experience, but she decided because of the coaching to call off her job search.

When Sarah finally got her performance review, she was criticized for her attitude and not portraying a positive view of her work. Her supervisor said that when she was frustrated, it was very apparent. But, thanks to her new appreciative outlook, her review also mentioned significant improvement on these issues. Her team members had communicated that Sarah was now motivating them and inspiring them in a way they had not experienced before.

Over a short period of time, Sarah's new attitude was showing up in her behavior and in her results with the team. She was motivating people to perform better, and to stick it out through a transition in the company. She was more satisfied with her job, and the frustration that she had been expressing had dissipated.

In addition to the questions I asked Sarah, here are some other appreciative questions to think about when you are facing challenges in your leadership:

- Am I showing by example how to lead well?
- What do I need to change about my behavior to get the best from those around me?
- Where can I go to learn what I need to know?
- What are we doing right and how can we do more of it?
- What does my team need from me?
- What opportunities are we not taking advantage of?

HOLDING A POSITIVE FUTURE VISION

Every leadership book talks about having a vision, which is why we don't need to linger here, but this notion is everywhere for a simple reason: it is of primary importance to establishing not just how you lead but where you're leading your organization to. It's hard to reach the summit of Mt. Everest if you start out saying, "Let's take a walk and see where we end up."

TRY THIS**Appreciation Practice****1. Group Appreciation**

Make a list of your team (or department or company) strengths and the most significant successes you have achieved with that group. Now imagine what you could achieve if the same people developed twice their intellectual, physical, or strategic resources. What power exists in your group that didn't exist before? What could you do if you had that much power? Imagine how good your people can be if you appreciate and develop them. Let your expectations go as high as they possibly can. The higher your expectations, the higher the likelihood your team will meet them.

2. Team Appreciation

Ask each member of your team to list five positive qualities of each team member. Ask each person to write a few sentences about how your team could be more successful by using those positive qualities more frequently or efficiently.

3. Vendor Appreciation

What are the strengths of your vendors? Are there some who are better than others? What makes them special? How can you use those relationships to your advantage? How can you teach the vendors you choose to work with how to be as good as the best example?

4. Systems Appreciation

Where are you most efficient? What systems are in place? Are there procedures, technologies, and systems you can replicate in other areas?

5. Customer Appreciation

Who gives you the best feedback? Who loves your product or service? What's common about that group? What are they responding to? How can you do more to expand your best relationships?

When it comes to envisioning a positive future, think of this appreciative question: “What is the best our future could be?” or “What are we capable of that may sound impossible?”

Herman Sloane is a man who spends his life dealing with vision . . . literally. A renowned eye surgeon, Herman Sloane heads up the Sloane Vision Center, his own vision-correction practice in Oakbrook, Illinois.

What is Dr. Sloane’s leadership vision? When evaluating the possibilities of his own practice, Sloane asked himself two important appreciative questions: What are we doing right? How can we do more of it? His answers: We’re doing a great job in patient care and service, and we have excellent technologies that allow us to focus on patient care and reduce distractions.

Sloane then looked at two specific goals: to establish a completely paperless office and use technology to make the office more efficient, and to keep focusing on the patients and making them feel comfortable and well-cared-for. He says,

As for the reduction in paper, it’s helped both in the front and the back. It helps me take more time talking to a patient. When I want to refer to previous visits, I have a clean, quick way to get to the information that I want. Nothing replaces face-to-face contact. I have to connect to people, and give them confidence that they can trust me. Fumbling with papers doesn’t help that at all. Also, a clear record eliminates transcription errors. There are no scribbles that need to be decoded. After the information is in the client file on the computer, it is not changed or rewritten. It also saves time. On the back side, it also saves me 1.5 full-time-employee equivalents. Doctors can be very slow to change to electronic records—“What if the server crashes? What if it’s hacked?”—I think as long as there’s redundancy we’re safer than if our office burned and our paper records went up in flames.

When I set up my practice, I also wanted to set up a place that is all about the patient. From the first time a patient contacts us, from the Web site or a referral, it’s important that they feel like they’re valued from the beginning. They’re important. Today in medicine, customer and patient service is sadly neglected. Because of the third-party system, the relationship between physician and patient has been clouded. Because I’m not in that model, when patients come to me they understand we’re going to listen

to them, execute as accurately as possible, and take good care of them.

What is your future vision for your organization? How bright could your future be? What are you capable of that may sound impossible? The possibilities are endless, particularly when you begin to embrace an appreciative approach.

WHEN YOUR TEAM SEEMS TO HAVE NO APPRECIATIVE EYE

Sometimes it's challenging to hold on to the appreciative approach, particularly when you're working with a team that is, perhaps, cynical, divided, or uncommunicative. Many teams have a long history of doing things a different way and resist any sort of change. What can you do if you are dealing with a difficult team?

TRY THIS

Leading from the Future

Here's a way to let go of the past and begin a dialogue about leading from the future. A simple step is to define what is and isn't working with your team, then make a commitment to tell the truth about what has been, and to lead based on the positives, and toward the vision of the future, rather than the past.

This exercise is adapted from the work of Miles Kiersen, a Midwest consultant who has been doing alignment work with executive teams for more than twenty years. Unlike many of the exercises in this book, this one will work best if you use an outside facilitator for it—either a trusted internal organization development resource or an external consultant. It's most powerful when you, the leader, can participate fully rather than work the room.

(Continued)

Step 1. Set aside time for your entire team to focus, and then introduce this exercise as a step toward leading from the future rather than reacting to the past. Make sure the group has the shared desire to focus on teamwork. The session could be a failure if the group doesn't have some commitment to telling the truth.

Step 2. Take the pulse of the team as it is now: What is your current reality? Set up two flip charts: one is for recording the positive, and one is for the negative. The positive chart lists what you will want to keep and leverage for the future. The negative lists what you will want to transcend, deal with.

Brainstorm with the group and write down some key words on each chart. For example "lack of trust, historically working in silos, making lots of money, nervous about the future, too many initiatives, not enough successors in the pipeline, wary of each other, not communicating everything we're thinking." The group may or may not be honest about the present state, but here are some magic questions. "What is the best thing about our organization?" "What are we avoiding talking about?" "What would you say if I weren't in the room?"

Step 3. When all of the individuals have expressed themselves, you'll have a good snapshot of the present. Draw the following model:

<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Future</i>
Two flipcharts: + (what works) / Δ (what we need to change)	The commitment we're making right now to let the past be, but to start leading from the future we want to create.	Shared future vision.

Step 4. Ask the group, "Does everyone agree that leading from the past doesn't work? Are we all willing to say that this is our past and not our future?"

What your team will come to realize based on this exercise is that patterns based on the past are addictive. Like giving up chocolate, giving up behavioral or thought patterns can be a challenge. These patterns continue because something about them works. It's as if you are caught in a current, based on the culture that was. Remember that unless the whole group shifts focus and commits to keeping each other accountable, you'll get caught in the patterns of the past. And if you're coming from the past, then your team will keep getting what you've always been getting. But once you can let go, there's nothing stopping you from actualizing your positive future.

The first step is encouraging your team to let go of past patterns and outlooks that don't support a positive future vision.

Using this exercise, even a splintered team can benefit from appreciative inquiry. Know that it takes constant practice. Results may take a long time, but I know from experience that positive change is always possible.

In this chapter we have laid the groundwork for leadership transformation by using Appreciative Inquiry to change our own perceptions and behavior to a smarter, more positive approach. We have also observed the positive effects of losing the need to be the expert and embracing the open-mindedness of curiosity. In the next chapter, we will start to put these skills in the context of our organizations. Get ready to become even smarter. Here is an appreciative question to get you started: In the context of your organization, what has helped you lead smarter?

Summary

- The more we develop our flexibility and ability to inquire and make connections, the better prepared we are to deal with an ever-more-complex global business environment.
- Engage your appreciative eye: look to the good first, and build on it.
- When you are leading other human beings—your stakeholders—you often need to let go of expertise so as to develop and cultivate leadership in others.
- Embrace curiosity. When we ask more questions, as adults or children, we gather more information, we see things from new perspectives, and we clarify our beliefs and attitudes.
- Ask the right questions, of yourself and others, by engaging in Appreciative Inquiry. This is the use of solution-focused questioning to create dialogue and learning in individuals and groups.