

# Leading through Crisis with the principles of Appreciative Inquiry

By: David Shaked

The theory and practice of Appreciative Inquiry are based on a few key principles. In this paper, I introduce the first six principles and offer some possible ways to apply each one to your leadership through crisis.

## *The Social Constructionist principle*

This principle tells us that we make meaning through conversations (with ourselves and others). At times of crisis, our conversations influence the stories we create. Here are a few things you could pay attention to when facing one:

- What conversations are you having about the crisis you're currently facing?
- What other conversations can you have? With whom?
- What other angles of the crisis are worth exploring through new conversations?

## *The Poetic principle*

This principle goes hand-in-hand with the previous principle. It reminds us that we tell stories about any reality. Just like a poem or a scenery, the story of our reality can be interpreted and presented or told in endless different ways. What matters is our choice of interpretation. So, if you are in the midst of a crisis, it is worth raising your awareness to:

- What choices have you made in the way you made sense of your crisis?
- What stories have you paid more attention to? What other stories have you paid less attention to?
- Which stories might help generate fresh thinking or energy to help you get unstuck?

## *The Wholeness principle*

The Wholeness principle suggests that better decisions and greater progress are made when we involve all the people who are relevant to a discussion or a decision (or represent as many of them as possible). In times of crisis, you might want to reflect on the following:

- Who are you currently talking to about the crisis? Who else can you invite into the conversation?
- Whose thoughts, feelings, preferences or opinions must be heard as part of this conversation? How can you enable that?

## *The Positive/Generative principle*

According to this key principle, all people, organisations and situations have a 'positive core' in them to be discovered, amplified and built upon. Taking a positive approach to any issue is just as valid a basis for learning or change as a deficit problem-focused approach. In times of crisis, we might forget to explore or may even exclude the search for that positive core. Here are a few points to consider:

- How have you been able to get through this crisis so far? What made it possible for you to still be here today, reading this piece?
- Amidst this crisis, who is still managing to perform or even outperform? How?

### *The principle of Simultaneity*

This principle made the greatest impact on me when I first learnt about AI. It helped me realise that our questions create an immediate impact. *Inquiry is change!* A question asked turns the attention and awareness of the people responding to it in one direction or another. Therefore, we ought to be more conscious of what we choose to inquire into. In times of crisis, it is easy to shift to deficit-based inquiry. The following options might provide some alternatives:

- As you go through the crisis, what have you been asking people about and what information or data have you been seeking?
- Have you been trying to understand, in depth, what has caused the crisis and where the most challenging areas of it are? What impact has it had on you – and on others?
- What else might you want to inquire into? What lines of strength-based inquiry could you pursue?

### *The Anticipatory principle*

This principle's key message is that people's behaviour and decisions about the current and future actions they take are highly influenced by what they think or imagine will happen. In times of crisis, our image of the likely future tends to look very dark; we feel that the difficulties we've experienced so far will continue for a long time, that we will lose what we had or enjoyed before and that our future is very uncertain. So, if you are experiencing a crisis, I invite you to ponder the following points:

- What images of the possible future are you holding to as you go through this crisis? Are they inspiring you?
- What alternative and more life-giving images would you like to have?

- Who do you know and who can you talk to, to help you shape a more uplifting vision of future possibilities?

I hope this overview of the principles of Appreciative Inquiry helps you see more possibilities for the current or any future crises you might face. I look forward to hearing your thoughts. If you choose to apply any of the principles to a crisis you are facing, I would be curious to hear your story of the impact you experienced from any of these ideas. May you find life-giving ways to navigate and lead through the crisis.

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