



executive coach

by Karlin Sloan



Developing an appreciative eye

Overworked? Uninspired? Burned out?
Executive, heal thyself.

“It could be argued that all leadership is appreciative leadership. It’s the capacity to see the best in the world around us, in our colleagues and in the groups we are trying to lead. It’s the capacity to see the most creative and improbable opportunities in the marketplace. It’s the capacity to see with an appreciative eye the true and the good, the better and the possible.”

—David L. Cooperrider

It was a wonderful morning this past Sunday. Waking up at 6 a.m., I took a short walk to the local coffee bar and read the Sunday *New York Times*. Then it hit me: It’s only 9 a.m. on a Sunday, and I have a proposal to write and an article due, and then I need to take the red-eye to California from New York, and I’m already stressed out about the work I didn’t finish on Saturday. Isn’t this supposed to be a day of rest in someone’s tradition? I dutifully head off to my computer to start my “weekend.”

I am so resentful of my success at this moment that I can hardly speak, but I call Laurel, my business colleague and a consultant I work with closely at my firm, to complain: “I cannot believe I didn’t finish this \$\$\$*\$ proposal yesterday, and that they want it on Monday.” She is also at work. Always the voice of reason, Laurel says, “This is a good moment to remember to be grateful for the incredible amount of work we have.”

So, off I go in gratitude for my good fortune, but somehow that doesn’t get me excited to start my workday.

I resort to staring at the blank screen, waiting for inspiration to come. In writing this proposal, I am uninspired by the enormous dollar amount that sometimes sets my spirits high and gives me the energy to move forward when I’m tired, stressed, overworked and at the end of my rope. I am uninspired by the amazing work I’ll be able to provide my staff if we close the deal. I am uninspired by the fantastically interesting challenge of the complex organization I am writing it for. I am

plain uninspired.

So, that is my topic of the day, dear reader: being uninspired. When we work long hours, travel long distances away from friends and family, lose the spirit of excitement and thrill of doing a good job and accomplishing great things, and just need a kick in the pants to keep moving, what makes it worthwhile? There is one simple concept that I apply to this situation, and it is the Appreciative Eye.

What is the Appreciative Eye, you ask? It is the perspective of valuing, of awe and inspiration. When we visit a museum, we often look at paintings for their beauty, their meaning or the value they can bring us, in a different way than we might look at, say, our blank computer screen on a Sunday morning.

In order to activate the Appreciative Eye, ask yourself the following questions:

When have I been inspired/excited/amazed by my work?

What are the details of that story?

How did I feel physically and mentally?

How was I impacted?

What effect did I have on other people around me?

What opportunities for inspiration are available to me today?

If I answer these questions for myself, I am often inspired, excited or amazed by my work in executive leadership development. When I think back to the moments when I really met a challenge or collaborated with someone in a position of great power to address their own challenges effectively, I remember why I love what I do. When I focus on how that feeling impacted me, I start

Appreciative Inquiry is driven by a different assumption: that focusing on what works, instead of what doesn't, propels us toward a more positive future.

experiencing it again. It's as if someone's 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—and it goes directly to what has inspired me in the past. I can use my writing to make a connection to someone else, someone who is working hard to deliver—to themselves, their families and their organization. Someone who is burned out, just like me.

I borrowed the concept of the Appreciative Eye from David Cooperrider, an organizational change guru from Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management. Cooperrider is one of the key thinkers behind a profound new discipline called "Appreciative Inquiry"—a discipline that has been used to help whole organizations become inspired. These questions flow out of his 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.

The word "appreciative" has multiple meanings. It means to look at something for its value, but it also means to increase in value. Appreciative Inquiry, a way of thinking and increasing the value of our organizations, is the polar opposite of the standard organizational process of focus and analysis. Take the question, "How can we gain strategic advantage by attracting and retaining exceptional talent?" Often our first stab at this question is to investigate what blocks us from achieving this goal. Then 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 these questions is that they will help us focus on a problem, and then help solve that problem. Appreciative Inquiry is driven by a different assumption: that focusing on what works, instead of what doesn't, propels us toward a more positive future. To this end, questions that might be asked in an Appreciative Inquiry include: "What would we like to see happen? What would a bright and positive future look

like? What strengths can we leverage? How have we attracted our best and brightest in the past?"

Many of us believe that our attitude shapes our destiny. Well, that's also true on a grand corporate scale. What we focus on becomes our reality. And if we as leaders are tired, stressed and uninspired, that focus can prove detrimental to the entire organization. Remember that the key to focusing on the right thing is beginning with the right question. Instead of, "How can I manage another day of this?" start asking, "What can I gain from today? How can I hold onto my Appreciative Eye?"

What does it mean to be an inspirational leader? Asking questions of yourself and others, exercising your Appreciative Eye, remaining curious and excited to learn, and wondering what life has in store for us. In the next city we visit, the next person we meet could have something unique and wonderful to offer. Being inspirational means remaining inspired...which is no small feat. Best of luck!

Karlin Sloan, M.A., is founder and president of Karlin Sloan & Co. (www.karlinsloan.com) in New York City, which provides executive coaching, team-building and leadership development services.

To find out more

**Collaborating for Change:
Appreciative Inquiry**
by David L. Cooperrider and
Diana L. Whitney

**Encyclopedia of Positive
Questions, Volume I:
Using AI to Bring Out the Best in
Your Organization**

by Diana L. Whitney, David L. Cooperrider, Brian S. Kaplin,
Amanda Trosten-Bloom, et al

Or contact Karlin Sloan for more information:
ksloan@karlinsloan.com

