

People Before Process: Utilizing the Appreciative Education Framework to Navigate Challenges and Maximize Opportunities

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Abstract

Leaders in higher education are facing new challenges that do not have a clear path forward. Utilizing the Appreciative Education framework, leaders can leverage the knowledge and expertise of team members by building trust, asking generative questions, and celebrating success. This people before process approach creates an environment where each team member can contribute at their best.

Keywords

Appreciative Administration, higher education leadership, building trust

At the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Director of Academic Advising at Utah State University (USU), I went into high gear making lists of things to do to prepare my staff to work and advise remotely. As a leader, I busily wrote down all the who's, what's, when's, and how's without asking a single question of anyone on my team for a full 24 hours. Feeling overwhelmed and like I was carrying a backpack of boulders on my shoulders, I called a colleague, Donna, to ask how she was approaching her work. Donna calmly replied, "Put people before process and let that mantra guide your priorities." I slumped back in my chair knowing that in my quest to check things off my to do list that I had forgotten to put the academic advisors themselves first. Parmar & Frost (2016) warned, "Putting process before people leads to a deficit of inspiration. It leaves the department unprepared for the kind of work that creates true vision and leadership". Instead of solving their issues, I needed to first check in with each of them to see how they were dealing with this unexpected and abrupt change in our lives and to inquire about their needs. As I began listening to my colleagues, I realized that I did not have to have all the answers, I just needed to ask better questions to learn in concert with my team how best to navigate the unprecedented challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Determined to lead better by asking better questions, the framework that I leaned heavily upon was the Appreciative Education theory-to-practice framework that I have been working with for several years. As a Certified Appreciative Adviser and the Lead Instructor for the online Appreciative Administration class at Florida Atlantic University, I knew first-hand how to ask generative questions to build strong relationships with students and that these generative questions would allow me to partner with my colleagues to ensure that we could create space for the entire team to share responsibility for our successful shift to remote work. The Appreciative Education theory-to-practice framework can be used to guide leaders' efforts to meet the extraordinary challenges and opportunities that lie before us (Bloom & McClellan, 2016). The purpose of this article is to describe how one institution, Utah State University (USU), used the Appreciative Education framework and the mantra,

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“People before process” to navigate the institution’s early response to the COVID-19 pandemic by grounding our actions in the six phases (i.e., Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don’t Settle) of Appreciative Education.

Disarm and Discover Phases

The *Disarm* phase involves creating a safe and welcoming environment (Bloom et al., 2008) and the *Discover* phase builds on the trust established by discovering and disclosing the positive capacity within leaders and the people and the organizations they lead (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Although in the immediate wake of the pandemic being declared I had inadvertently forgotten the importance of the Disarm and Discover phases, thankfully our team had worked hard before the pandemic to create a safe and welcome environment and to build trusting relationships with each other. A people before process approach in Disarm and Discover allowed me to rebuild trust and transparency. There are five advantages that accrue when leaders are transparent:

1. Problems are solved faster
2. Teams are built easier
3. Relationships grow authentically
4. People begin to promote trust in their leader
5. Higher levels of performance emerge.
(Llopis, 2012, para. 19)

As USU moved to remote learning and working, transparency during this time of uncertainty resulted in unleashing the creativity of each team member in order to brainstorm together to nimbly adapt to ever-changing circumstances and to create new processes. Because no one had the answers about how working remotely could be done efficiently and effectively, we used generative questions to build the infrastructure and guide the processes for working remotely:

- What is it about you and the way you do your job that you are most proud of?
- What do you need from your supervisor as you transition to working remotely?
- What skills or behaviors are you finding most effective and well-received by students in this new virtual environment?
- In this moment of navigating the unexpected, what do you believe are your most significant strategic advantages? How can the rest of our team learn from your strengths?
- What are the qualities in our existing team that most foster enthusiasm, information sharing, and collaboration toward common goals? How can we utilize these qualities as strengths in navigating the unexpected? (Whitney et al., 2002).

As we listened to team members respond to these generative, open-ended questions, we recognized that our team wanted to rely on the trusting relationships they had already established with other team members. By centering the needs of the team, we created processes to elevate the relational aspects of our work. Although it is easier to deal with uncertainty when you are certain about the people around you, we learned that we had to be proactive in maintaining the trust that we had already built before the pandemic. For example, we created a new 30-minute virtual weekly meeting called Breakfast with Buddies, which had no agenda other than catching up with each other and engaging in casual conversation. In addition, we developed a new People Operations Committee that was

charged with intentionally creating connections between team members by creating activities to help the team feel valued, recognized, and appreciated. The People Operations Committee organized getting to know you games, inspirational speakers, and an art class. At the beginning of each staff meeting, the committee invited two people to share a photo with the team and describe the significance of the photo. The committee enjoyed using a different skillset and described being on the committee as invigorating, engaging, and fulfilling. Most of the activities did not cost money and were valuable in making intentional connections between the people on our team. The outputs of this committee became one of the highlights of working remotely.

Dream and Design Phases

The *Dream* phase shapes the strengths of the team and begins to “create a safe platform to begin developing inspiring dreams about what the future might hold for them, both personally and professionally, and for the institutions and the people they lead” (Bloom, 2016, p. 203). Dream leads to *Design* as the team collectively determines “who will do what, when, and how” (Bloom, 2016, p. 205). A people before process approach helped our group innovate to co-design our shared future as we experienced the uncharted terrain of the pandemic. For example, our team recognized that we would need to reimagine the major exploration experience for undecided students. We envisioned possible futures by asking ourselves, “What are our biggest hopes for our students as they explore majors? What would a great major exploration experience look like for our students? If everything went as well as it possibly could, what would the process look like? What would the result be?”

By answering the above Dream questions, the innovative Design steps we needed to take to meet the needs of our students revealed themselves almost immediately. One advisor connected with stakeholders in a college to design a process for sharing lists of students with advisors in the students’ area of interest. Another advisor created a Canvas course with guided exercises for major exploration. The peer advisors collected opportunities for socially connecting students to clubs in the colleges and shared upcoming engagement events in a weekly newsletter with students. Taking action on the items from the Design phase created new synergies within our team and with our stakeholders throughout the institution.

Deliver and Don’t Settle Phases

The *Deliver* phase focuses our team efforts to work “collaboratively and supportively to make the dream a reality” (Bloom & McClellan, 2016, p. 206). The *Don’t Settle* phase is a reminder that “we need to continually strive not for perfection, but for improvement” (Bloom & McClellan, 2016, p. 206). People are centered before process in the Deliver and Don’t Settle phases when leaders provide feedback when something is going right, maintain flexibility when shifts are necessary, and self-reflect to keep getting better.

As our team began implementing their innovative ideas, we intentionally recognized the efforts of team members who were adapting and pivoting quickly. We focused an entire staff meeting on crowdsourced recognition by asking questions such as: Tell me about a time when you saw a colleague adapt quickly to meet the emerging needs of a student? Who would like to brag on a fellow team member who went above and beyond to help a student? This recognition “gives a sense of satisfaction and community. When others care about and value our contribution, it inspires us to strive for excellence” (Whitney et al., 2002, p. 43). The stories that were told by team members were collected and individual stories that emerged about a particular team member were sent directly to the person and their supervisor. An example is:

Dear {name}, In our staff meeting today, you were recognized by {name} as someone who is deserving of recognition. Your quick turnaround on an email (and after work hours!) made a big difference in her ability to get student questions answered. Our community is incredibly grateful for your partnership, and we are so glad you are on our team!

This type of public recognition celebrated what team members were doing well and provided opportunities for the team to reflect on their purpose and values.

Because not all innovations are implemented smoothly, we tried to prepare our advisors for the unexpected plot twists by asking questions such as: Tell me about a time you successfully navigated a plot twist that you were not expecting? What strategies did you use to come up with a plan? Asking these types of questions helped to normalize that although no one had experienced a pandemic before, but we had all faced unexpected life events before that we had navigated.

Conclusion

A people before process approach invites innovation through each phase of the Appreciative Education framework. It promotes shared responsibility and accountability at the individual and team levels. Through elevating questions, we consistently promote the unique strengths of each team member and ourselves.

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