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Appreciative Coaching

Contributing to a Science of Positive Human Change

There are well over 250 recorded areas of application of the Appreciative Inquiry principles and stages today, since its beginnings in the 1980s. One is Appreciative Coaching. In this article we celebrate the contribution of this method to the field of positive human change, take a deeper look at the evolution of Appreciative Coaching since the initial publication of the book of the same name, share the learning and insights of the one co-founder who is still practicing Appreciative Coaching, and discuss how Appreciative Coaching can support and contribute in these times of intense challenge and change.

The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.

William James (American Psychologist 1842–1910)

In early 2021, Heike was invited by the International Coach Federation (ICF) Germany to present a webinar on Appreciative Coaching (AC). She had been working with AC since participating in a workshop with its creators at the World AI Conference in Orlando in 2007. While preparing the webinar and re-reading the book, she wondered what had become of the original founders of *Appreciative Coaching* (2007). Were they still practicing? In what way had AC evolved since the original publication? And, last but not least, do the principles and methods hold true in 2021?

Heike contacted the three authors. It turned out that Sara had left the path of AC shortly after the publication to pursue her own projects and is now working with the elderly around the topic of Appreciative Aging (www.saraorem.com). For many years, Jackie and Ann collaborated as AC coaches, researchers and trainers, on one occasion sharing the stage with David Cooperrider in Bangkok, Thailand. In 2017 their follow-up book *Pivoting. A Coach's Guide to Igniting Substantial Change* was published. The book highlights the results of their research into what are called "aha moments" or "profound moments of change" that they witnessed as coaches. Jackie retired from presenting, but she and Ann continued partnering on a number of publications. Ann continues to be active doing workshops, coaching, writing and researching. One thing becomes clear: AC has not stood still, but

The aim of Appreciative Coaching is for clients to experience greater feelings of resourcefulness and completion.

has continued to evolve and has made a steady contribution to the science of positive human change. The development of AC can be roughly ordered into three research stages.

A short introduction: What is Appreciative Coaching?

Appreciative Coaching is based on the same five principles as Appreciative Inquiry, which are considered the DNA of the appreciative approach. There are five tools that flow from the principles which help clients build more flourishing lives:

- 1 Focusing attention (Constructionist principle)
- 2 Art of the question (Simultaneity principle)
- 3 Power of vision (Anticipatory principle)
- 4 Building capacity (Positive principle)
- 5 Pivoting (Poetic principle)

AC follows the structure of the AI stages: Define/Discover, Dream, Design, Destiny. The aim of Appreciative Coaching is for clients to experience greater feelings of resourcefulness and completion. Clients are not seen as objects to be fixed or problems to be solved, but rather as mysteries – like art or poetry – to be appreciated. Positive science shows that what clients focus on is what they grow. So, a coach's questions are generative, intended to stimulate and engage clients in reconnecting with their life-force to craft their own solutions. Creative methods can play a role, from drawing and photography to movement, in the dream phase.

Unlike problem-based coaching or the GROW-approach (Goal, Reality, Opportunities, Way), in AC the coach begins by helping clients to shift from a problem-focus on their situation to a solution-focus. The Constructionist principle says, "what we pay attention to grows", so focusing on the situation as a problem only grows the problem rather than the solution. The AC coach's method of inquiry is designed to help reveal the client's deeper desire "behind" the problem.

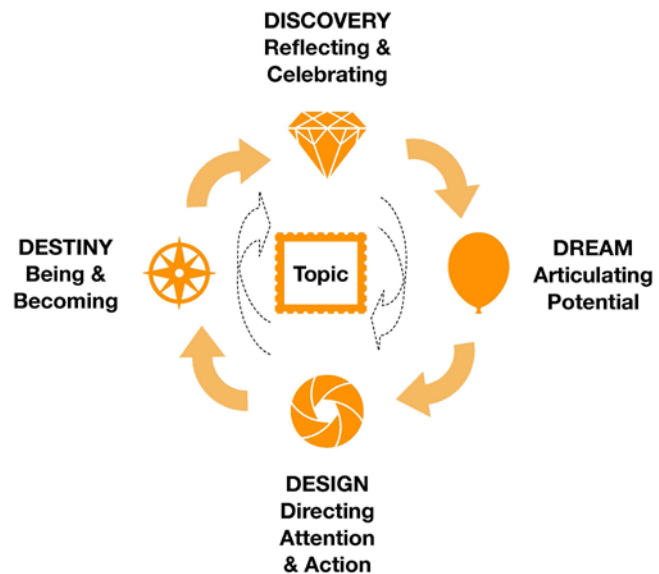
There are four generative questions typically asked in the beginning of a coaching engagement designed to expand and deepen the client's coaching journey:

- 1 What gives life to you now?
- 2 Describe a high point or peak experience in your life or work up to now.
- 3 What do you most value about yourself, your relationships and the nature of your work?
- 4 What are one or two things you want more of in your life?

The foundations of Appreciative Coaching: The first research journey

The journey of AC began in 2005 when the three authors started to research the possibility of applying the principles and stages of Appreciative Inquiry to the realm of coaching. They were all Ph.D. graduates in organization development from the Fielding Graduate University, USA, at a time when the metaphor for organizations was still “a problem to be solved”. The three women were intrigued

The Appreciative Coaching Model



with this positive approach that offered a significant shift in perspective about organizational change. The coaching research project resulted in the development of the Appreciative Coaching® model and book, *Appreciative Coaching: A Positive Process for Change* (2007).

After the launch of the book, interest sparked and Ann and Jackie were invited to lead presentations and conduct workshops in the US and around the world for audiences of coaches, OD practitioners, managers and human resource professionals. In their travels, they brought AC to more than fifteen countries over a ten-year period. Combined with ICF-accredited online courses based on the book, to date hundreds of coaches have been trained in Appreciative Coaching.

The original Appreciative Coaching book was designed as a 'how to' guide on developing the skills to be an appreciative coach.

Building on the positive science foundation: Key perspectives of AC

The original AC book was designed as a “how to” guide on developing the skills to be an appreciative coach. The book begins, however, with a focus on the science of positive methods that underlies this approach and acknowledges the influence of four bodies of research: Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Organizational Scholarship, Positive Psychology and Solution-Focused Brief Therapy.

Research shows that through asking generative questions, the past can be reframed and re-interpreted in the present, which expands the choices clients have in anticipating their desired future.

These bodies of research were rooted in findings of quantum physics, social constructionism and the sciences of chaos theory, self-organizing systems and complexity theory. Back then, these were still new emerging world perspectives. Today, they have moved ever closer to becoming part of mainstream thinking on human change and development.

Another key foundational perspective was that of an expanded perspective of time that supported the Anticipatory, Simultaneity and Poetic principles. Ann had written her dissertation on the impact of Newtonian linear time on virtually all modern psychological explanations and theories of change. Her research focused on the evolution of an expanded or holistic view of time as a new framework for human growth and change. In AC, past, present and future are seen as co-occurring in an integrated whole and all are equal influencers of a person's capacity for change. In bringing this to coaching, AC distinguishes itself from problem-oriented coaching approaches still focused on the limitations of linear time.

Research shows that through asking generative questions, the past can be reframed and re-interpreted in the present, which expands the choices clients have in anticipating their desired future. The conversation in an AC coaching session is therefore around growth in the present, not "bridging the gap" to a distant future. It is about making explicit to clients that they live in the present moment and thus have the capacity to expand their life choices every day to encompass their future desires. Encouraging clients to acknowledge and access their inner process opens them to experiencing a sense of flow, passion and energy in their lives, and the realization that they truly are expanding in the here and now: "From today on I continue to do more of what I already do and enjoy (but wasn't aware of)."

Central to AC are pivotal or 'aha' coaching moments that can ignite substantial change.

Expanding AC to ignite substantial change: The second research journey

The more Ann and Jackie presented on the AC approach and gained experience as coaching professionals, the more intrigued they became about what was causing their clients to make deeper shifts in learning, perspective and even identity. Central to AC are pivotal or "aha" coaching moments that can ignite substantial change. These are insights clients have that could not have been predicted by either client or coach. As there was little research on what actually causes or inspires these pivotal moments and learning shifts in coaching, Ann and Jackie began to deepen AC with a second research project, building on the power of the Poetic principle in AI/AC and focusing on the tool of pivoting. The Poetic principle

is based on the belief that humans can reinterpret their life stories by constructing new ways of thinking, feeling and acting, and that their lives are choiceful.

The research duo observed in their clients that pivotal moments were lived experiences that could not be quantified, predicted or planned by either coach or client. Thus, viewing pivots as an object of study from the traditional mechanistic approach would have limitations. They determined that these moments were better described as emerging from an inner process of “revealing” which could be observed and studied from a hermeneutic (i.e., interpretive) perspective. Ten years after their first book, *Pivoting: A Coach’s Guide to Igniting Substantial Change* (Clancy and Binkert, 2017) went deeper to help coaches better understand how these moments occur and what role they play in this process.

The AC approach rests on a key premise: begin where the client is.

Appreciative coaches are instruments of change: The third research journey

The AC approach rests on a key premise: begin where the client is. However, coaches can only begin where the client is by also discovering where they begin with their own thoughts, beliefs and life experiences.

As OD practitioners, Ann and Jackie realized that, as their AC experience grew, it was essential for coaches to be aware their own foundational theories and existential beliefs about human change. They realized that worldviews not only shape who people are, but that appreciative coaches must ensure that their behavior is consistent with their worldview.

The Mindset of an Appreciative Coach

<i>In Appreciative Coaching the mindset of the coach plays a central role. What do you believe to be true? Where on the continuum would you see yourself? What is your outlook on life and change? This influences your stance as a coach.</i>	
Reality is objective and “out there” and human change is restricted by the universal laws of science.	↔ Humans change their world by creating new meaning through language and their interaction with others.
Personal change is a solitary journey.	↔ People require love and support to make lasting changes in their lives.
Human change is incremental. Change must begin with an analysis of a person’s situation before action can be taken.	↔ Human change can be transformational. Deep change begins by asking the right questions.
Individuals are largely determined or influenced by the events of their past in terms of who they become.	↔ Individuals can change who they are by reinterpreting their past, making choices in the present and creating images of the future.
A person’s future is largely influenced by unconscious forces from the past combined with current choices in life.	↔ People have the ability to create a desired future through the conscious choice of the language and images they focus on.

AC coaches come from the generative belief that people are dynamic energy-based 'relational beings'.

As an example, there are coaches who might approach their clients as objects to be studied, based on mechanistic beliefs of determinism, linearity and objectivity. They might believe they can help “fix” them eternally. In AC, however, coaches come from the generative belief that people are dynamic energy-based “relational beings.” Instead, they encourage clients to cultivate positive self-awareness and inner guidance to make informed choices about their environment, relationships and inner capacity for growth and development.

Over the years of AC presentations and training sessions, Ann and Jackie were struck by how many of the coaches they worked with were not only unaware of their own existential beliefs, but also uninformed of recent findings from the phenomenological, generative and quantum sciences. They realized that being open to newly emerging beliefs was essential to be the kind of appreciative coach that can anticipate pivotal experiences for the client. They concluded that the underlying generative philosophy of AC requires coaches to reach for higher levels of awareness of their own worldview about reality, human capacity and the nature of life itself.

Subsequently, on their third research journey, Ann and Jackie identified three emerging beliefs about human change which differ dramatically from mechanistic perceptions and which better match their own experiences with clients as dynamic, energy-based beings in continual process. These emerging beliefs are now incorporated into the AC training approach.

1. Self as process The first belief is how one defines “self.” The literature review in this area yields two competing perspectives: “self as object” or “self as process.” From the mechanistic approach, humans are seen as objects that can be predetermined, measured and controlled externally. This view of self as object continues not only in mechanistic approaches but also in development theories that still describe the self as an independent unit within a social context. In contrast, recent neuroscience tells us humans have a self-transforming brain/mind that is awakening and which remains open to change throughout the lifespan. Thus, the self keeps changing, arising and adapting depending on its relationships and situations, and actually has no independent existence (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). AC coaches support clients to access their own inner process and guidance as dynamic energy-based beings who are intrinsically relational and in continual process.

2. Life in motion The second belief is a shift from a static view of humans to one that recognizes people as “life in motion,” that is, self-organizing and evolutionary. The perspective of seeing humans as process in movement is supported by theorists from William James,



Still Life in Motion by Tom Brown

<http://tombrownstudio.weebly.com/>

Hans-George Gadamer and Alfred Whitehead to Kenneth Gergen, David Bohm and Robert Kegan. Developmental and evolutionary change theorists such as Ken Wilbur, Jenny Wade, Frederick LaLoux and Clare Graves offer a perspective of historically emerging stages of human consciousness leading to ever greater levels of world and human complexity. Appreciative Coaching and other generative coaching approaches are part of this new emerging consciousness which respects and supports the holistic wisdom of living systems and the role evolutionary momentum plays in human change.

- 3. Meaning-making as movement** The third belief focuses on what Robert Kegan (1982) describes as the importance of seeing meaning-making as movement. When clients self-organize (make meaning in the moment) they are engaged in what he calls a primary human motion: bringing what was hidden or embedded into emergence, creating an “object” out of what was an internalized “subject” that can then be observed and changed. This movement matches what is described in hermeneutics as interpreting and understanding something that “appears” in personal experience. Thus, the stance of the Appreciative coach is one of supportive “midwife” or facilitator rather than “mechanic”.

These findings have been incorporated in one of the latest AC publications: “Searching for Soul and Finding Self” in *Innovations in Leadership Coaching: Research and Practice* (2020).

Summary and future outlook of Appreciative Coaching

Appreciative Coaching lives up to its promise of practicing what it preaches: it is itself adaptive and open to change while remaining rooted in science.

Appreciative Coaching has grown in its scope to embrace an ever more expanded and generative view of what coaching can contribute to the science of positive human change. Due to its unique concept of time and intention, it has proven to be a fertile ground in applying new emerging wisdom from neuroscience, complexity, quantum, integral and generative thinking. Appreciative Coaching lives up to its promise of practicing what it preaches: it is itself adaptive and open to change while remaining rooted in science. The unfolding journey of AC has been enlightening, encouraging and supportive of the belief that humans can live choiceful lives – a resonant idea that AI first brought to organizational change more than thirty years ago.

What does AC offer in these volatile times? Over the past fifteen years, it has evolved its scientific and experiential foundation into a coherent framework of philosophy, methodology and tools to adapt to today’s real-life challenges.

Perhaps the greatest discovery of this generation will be that humans have their own inner compass to lead them.

Clients must now deal with great change: a global world of political, racial and environmental conflict; an unprecedented digital transformation; and increasing organizational complexity with inherent polarities and ambiguities which cannot be “problem-solved.” More and more individuals are looking for ways to access their own inner guidance, talents and strengths. They are waking up to a broader sense of who they can be as old limiting beliefs about human change are challenged and overcome. They wish their own voices to be heard. These individuals are not looking for a coach to fix them, but for one who appreciates the mystery they are, and who will support them in living their passion and purpose. Perhaps the greatest discovery of this generation will be that humans have their own inner compass to lead them. If so, Appreciative Coaching is more relevant than ever as people search for inner awareness to help them navigate this world of increasing choice and complexity.

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