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# Appreciative Facilitation Based on Practical Rules of Thumb

**ABSTRACT**

Appreciative facilitation of teams is based on a few rules of thumb. As facilitators, we all seem to focus on the scenario that 'people in work groups or teams achieve great results, use powerful methods and use each others expertise, and also develop this competence'. What a wave of energy hope, inspiration, and success in organizations that would create!

When I was introduced to Appreciative Inquiry, it gave words and meaning to a way of working that was already familiar to me, albeit implicitly. This article contains explicit practical suggestions, based on how I encourage and support the shaping of powerful teams. I call this approach the 'appreciative facilitation' of teams.

The facilitator using such an approach needs a consistent focus on 'what is' and what works by giving meaning, identifying results, recognizing talents, creating connections, making room for reflective moments and signalling new horizons.

By appreciating the strengths team members have, the successes they have achieved and the potential of those strengths for new activities, one encourages the energy needed to actually take the next step. Thus the facilitator supports growth and development, and prevents the team from falling back into old patterns of thinking and behaviour.

Appreciative facilitation of teams is based on a few rules of thumb:

**Rule of thumb A**  
**Understanding precedes being understood**

Each team most needs 'free space' to talk to and understand each other. Using dialogue to explore 'what is' as well as how team members experience reality lays the foundation for effective learning together as a team. This way of communication requires a keen, compassionate examination of those views.

**Through dialogue**

The quality of the conversation within the team determines the learning capacity of the team. If appreciative facilitators encourage dialogue, they put emphasis on an investigative approach, which considers slow and profound thinking and the suspension of judgments and assumptions. The goal of dialogue is to enable new thinking to emerge, based on 'thinking along', rather than 'thinking against'.

**It is easier said than done: start from the strengths of a team member ... What you do is put a magnifying glass on and appreciate the person's uniqueness.**

The result is not an immediate, concrete solution, but understanding each other's assumptions and actions. In a powerful dialogue process, team members invite each other to take their point of view, to 'be in their shoes' for awhile. This requires really understanding each other and respecting current inadequacies: in other words, to have compassion. (Senge, 1992)

#### **Through reframing**

For some team members, it is easier to see events negatively, rather than to tend to positive interpretations. The appreciative facilitator assists in redirecting interpretations that have no added value, such as: 'Sven is working against me by not keeping to the rules', which can also be interpreted as 'Sven has decided that he can assist the customer better by not applying the rule in this case'.

Team members will use this approach when they realize that everyone's reaction is determined by their frame of reference – so you can also choose a different framework which is more effective or more consistent with team values. The appreciative facilitator will challenge a team complaining about a tyrannical boss to seek a solution through mutual support and a common approach in communicating with the boss about the perceived abuses. Thus the problem of 'difficult boss' is reframed into the solution 'strong team'. (Block, 2000)

#### **Rule of thumb B**

##### **Appreciation brings in energy**

The most powerful engine for good work emerges when it makes sense for a team member to 'get going': to build something, to explore, to learn a skill or to investigate limiting beliefs in connection with others. That has an inner motivation and is increased by (external) ratification: the interest or the trust of team mates, the faith that you will succeed, the constructive feedback from the first results. Success leads to new success and encourages another step forward.

##### **Through making success visible**

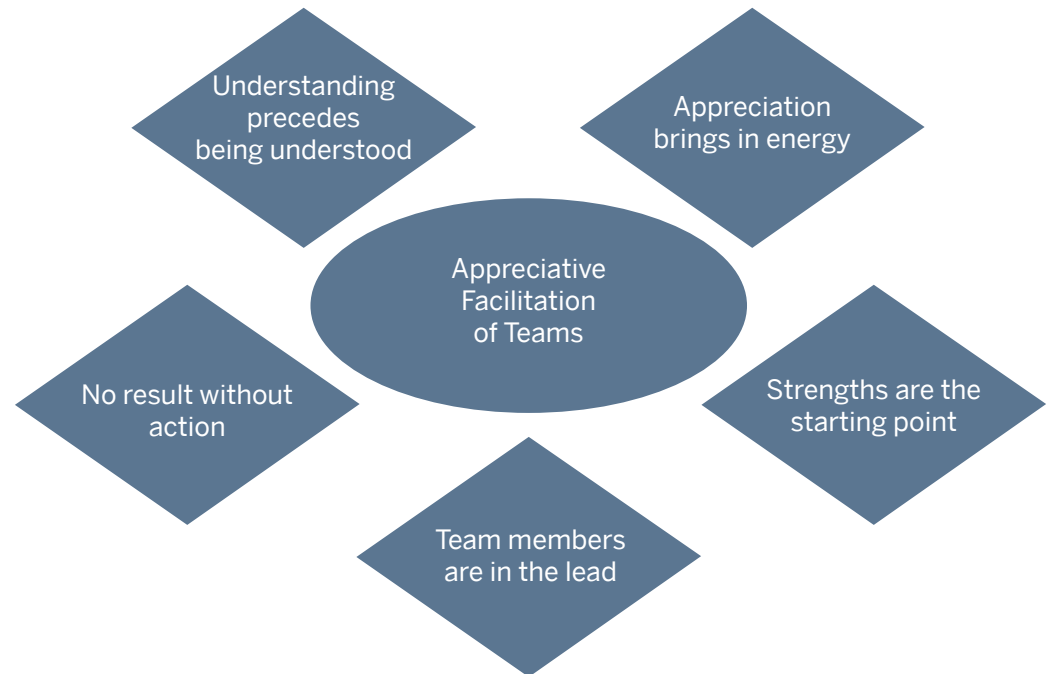
Some team members believe that they are not capable of doing or learning certain things, or that they do not know enough, or cannot make decisions. You can recognize them because they want to involve experts, embrace best practices from other organisations, avoid risks and learn in a 'consuming' way, whereas the skills, growth, responses and choices can often only be found in their own 'being'. But it requires (self-) confidence, focus and courage to tackle the issues themselves. And that is exactly where the appreciative facilitator contributes: by making team successes visible, encouraging the team to build from that, appreciating first attempts, recognising outcomes and challenging the team to continue.

Team successes provide new energy to experience even more successful experiences. Moreover, they are the key to understanding when the team is at its best. Reflection on what worked offers a motivating basis for new successes.

##### **Through being specific**

In the first stages of a new task or assignment team members need confirmation of the things that are going well. (Smit, 2002) Their main concern at that moment is: 'How do I survive this?' and 'Do I do well?' All positive feedback in this phase of learning works as an accelerator, and it is important that all team members know and apply this knowledge.

Figure 1: the rules of thumb



Positive appreciation is the same as giving a compliment. Formulating compliments on the effort instead of the result encourages people to develop themselves. (Dweck, 2006) Being as concise as possible is also essential, especially when the facilitator says precisely what went well and what the positive effect was on the team level. If the team member thinks that his or her conduct is 'normal' or 'just lucky', you can emphasize the talent and potential you see by giving more examples where the person also showed this behaviour. (Landsberg, 1999) Thus a pattern of strength becomes visible.

### **Rule of thumb C** **Strengths are the starting point**

Each team member possesses qualities, more or less visible. Some qualities are only visible as pitfalls or drawbacks, such as 'perfectionism'. By rephrasing them as underlying strengths (eg 'care') as a basis for development in the team, the effect is immediately noticeable. The team member will use his skills more, which has an impact on the rest of the team. Not everyone is good at everything, and need not be. It is therefore essential to have insight in your personal strengths and undertake activities that use that unique combination.

### **Through investigating**

It is easier said than done: start from the strengths of a team member. Some team members are mainly seen as 'being difficult'. Yet the investigation of their behaviour is the key. Some people do not show the behaviour they really want to show or they simply do not know which behaviour is appropriate for team effectiveness.

Through addressing behaviour and trying to figure out what the intentions of team members are, you will get closer to their strengths. Someone who lingers in a highly detailed formulation of goals and results can do that from a talent of 'caring'. If you can tap into the quality and help to deploy it effectively, everyone

## The facilitator can contribute to the appreciation of the differences between team members.

in the team benefits. What you do is put a magnifying glass on and appreciate the person's uniqueness.

### Through developing uniqueness

The next step might be to support the development of strengths. Sometimes that is about becoming even better at what you are already good at. Sometimes it is about the search for 'levers' (Dewulf, 2009), additional abilities that help to increase the use of strengths. Sometimes it is about applying the same quality in other situations. Sometimes it is just more conscious deployment of the strengths that leads to magnification.

In addition, the facilitator can contribute to the appreciation of the differences between team members. Genuine collective learning occurs only then when team members let themselves be influenced by each other's approaches, perspectives and expertise, working together toward improvements or innovations.

### Rule of thumb D

#### Team members are in the lead

It is perhaps not always consciously done, but the team members themselves completely determine their own work and learning process. Their motivation and strengths lead. The facilitator can 'merely' support the conscious use of this fact. Not every team member will consciously take control of the working and learning of the team. This often leads to a dependent attitude: trainers should indicate what and how to learn, or the manager must determine whether the result is 'good enough'. The appreciative facilitator helps the team become aware of its own responsibility, the opportunities for self-management, and ways to assess their impact.

### Through focus on solutions

Appreciative facilitation of teams is sometimes very subtle, in the things that you don't do as a facilitator. This applies particularly to a focus on solutions instead of problems. Problems and failure experiences are often discussed in the team with the (implicit) intention of appointing a culprit, or these issues are not discussed and the tension goes underground, so energy goes on what they do not want. The alternative is to make clear that something is going on or went wrong, then jointly decide how things should be and change it. Then the energy flows toward what the team does want.

### Through impact thinking

Subsequently, 'impact thinking' is very helpful in appreciative facilitation. Impact thinking means that the facilitator requires the team members to reflect on the impact of their actions again and again. Team members evaluate their behaviour or approach in relation to the question: is this action effective in light of what we want to achieve? (Visser, 2005) If yes, let's go on! If not, what is needed is to achieve the desired impact?

Thinking in the terms that 'this action is more effective than' is a more powerful – guiding – approach than 'this action is wrong'. When used from this perspective, feedback from others on the impact of your actions is supportive.

For me the art of appreciative facilitation is about its minimalist nature. With minimum steering interventions, the facilitator ensures the most effective support.

### **Rule of thumb E**

#### **No result without action**

The main direction given by a facilitator is the insistence on creating an experience. Just thinking about a quality or expressing an ambition does not lead to a tangible change in the outside world. Experiencing the impact of one's strengths through action offers the potential to give new meaning to these strengths.

#### **Through practical support**

The facilitator does not seem to play a major role in this phase: the team must do this themselves. But sometimes practical support can be a good way to support the team in maintaining upward momentum. A facilitator can assist in preparations, be co-executor or pioneer within the organization. As long as the initiative and the implementation of the solution remains with the team, the facilitator serves the interest of the team.

#### **Through using the network**

In this phase of putting things into action, the appreciative facilitator can encourage the involvement of others in the team network. Who would be a critical person to support the team's action? Who has the necessary expertise? Who knows the way? What would encourage that person to help? So you acknowledge that the team has a whole arsenal of support people available and that using this expertise is effective.

#### **Through challenging and re-calibrating**

Dealing with new practices and collaborations can be exciting; the daily practice can sometimes feel like complete chaos. Reason enough for team members to only partially put new insights into practice, or avoid them altogether. The appreciative facilitator helps not to fall back into old patterns by constantly putting the feelings, the dilemmas, the choices and constraints experienced by the team on the agenda. By encouraging the exchange of experiences, by appreciating the steps that have been taken, by acknowledging feelings and by supporting next steps, the facilitator establishes an environment in which team members can experiment and are allowed to make mistakes. Followed, of course, by the invitation to learn from these mistakes and try again...

#### **Appreciative facilitation 'with your fingertips'**

My experience is that it is important to make the connection between the rules of thumb: each team member has his own strengths, but one needs to recognize them to be able to work with them for the benefit of the team. And only when people harvest success from using their qualities in their team are they able to see the impact they have had and how they have helped their team develop.

For me the art of appreciative facilitation is about its minimalist nature. With minimum steering interventions, the facilitator ensures the most effective support. The intended effect is that the team itself takes on responsibility, takes up initiative, perform actions and takes care of follow-up.

In this contribution, by reflecting on my five rules of thumb, which determine my behaviour as an appreciative facilitator of teams, I hope to inspire fellow facilitators to make explicit and share their own practical wisdom as well.

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