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## **APPRECIATIVE ADMINISTRATION: APPLYING THE APPRECIATIVE EDUCATION FRAMEWORK TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Funding shortages, increased accountability, growing competition for students, increased demands on faculty, corporatization of the academy, changes in the student body, increased demands for expensive engagement experiences, and other trends have significantly impacted and destabilized the system of higher education. As these trends are coupled with higher education's traditionally slow to change culture, highly political bureaucracy, and functional silos, the challenges facing higher education become foreboding. As a result, universities count on administrators to figure out creative ways to stay competitive and develop solutions for addressing these challenges. Yet, given the depth of the challenges and the complexity of higher education institutions, including their diverse sizes, missions, and constituencies, no single "silver bullet" exists for higher education administrators to access in order to "solve" all these problems.

Consequently, to be competitive in the long run, higher education administrators need to create work environments that encourage and empower all employees to contribute to devising and implementing creative solutions to the challenges facing higher education today and tomorrow. After all, just as there is no one "silver bullet" there is no one hero that can gallantly arrive on campus and single-handedly solve all the problems. Complex challenges require creative, synergistic solutions. Hence, we would argue that the answers to the complex issues facing higher education institutions lie within the employees that know best the unique challenges, resources, and

opportunities inherent in each individual organization. The job of higher education administrators is, therefore, to create a work environment where each employee has the opportunity and potential to build upon the best of what is already happening in the organization as a platform for unleashing the dreams, ideas, and energy needed to achieve the unique mission and goals of each institution. As a result, the purpose of this paper is to provide higher education administrators a theory-to-practice framework, based on the Appreciative Education model, for leading institutions and fostering creative solutions for addressing the challenges higher education faces and pursuing individual institutional missions, visions, and goals.

### **APPRECIATIVE EDUCATION**

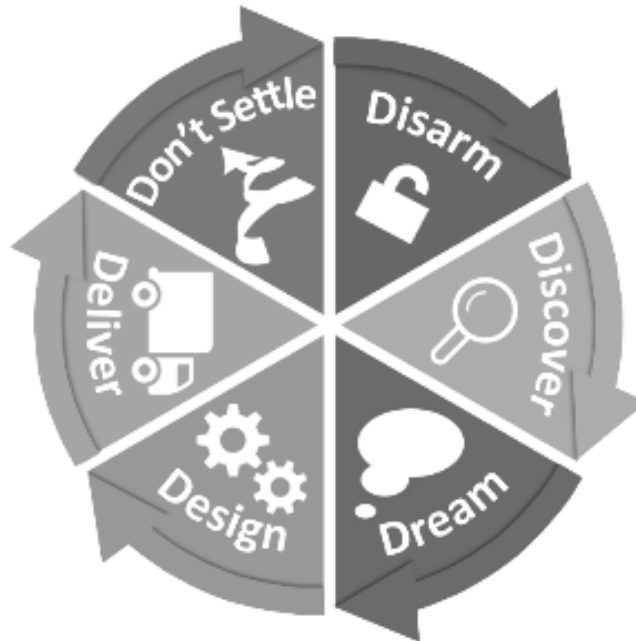
Appreciative Education is a theory-to-practice framework, grounded in the appreciative mindset, that harnesses the combined power of the organizational development theory of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and the Appreciative Advising (Bloom and Martin, 2002; Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008) framework for building strong relationships between people.

**Appreciative Inquiry (AI).** Appreciative Inquiry was first introduced by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) at Case Western Reserve University. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) found that the questions he was asking of people about their organizations were fateful in that when he asked positive questions he received quite different responses than when he asked questions that invited people to complain about their organization. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) proposed four phases of Appreciative Inquiry as a means for optimizing the success of organizations: Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver. Subsequently, numerous for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, religious organizations, and educational institutions have used Appreciative Inquiry to increase their productivity and profits (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003)

**Appreciative Advising (AA).** The appreciative advising model (see figure 1) evolved from the Appreciative Inquiry Model as a result of the work of Bloom and Martin (2002), who demonstrated how the four phases of Appreciative Inquiry (Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver) could be adapted by academic advisors to enhance the effectiveness of their interactions with students. Later, Bloom, Hutson, and He (2008), recognizing the need to adapt the model to the ongoing relational process of academic advising, proposed the addition of two phases (Disarm and Don't Settle) to Cooperrider's initial four Phases. Disarm suggests the need for the establishment of trust

in the relationship and Don't Settle, focuses on the need to support students persistence in achieving their dreams. The Appreciative Advising Model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Appreciative Advising Model



Subsequently the Appreciative Advising framework has been adapted to enhance interactions with students in a number of different higher education settings including: first-year seminars, admissions, orientation, learning communities, tutoring, etc. (Hutson, 2010; Bloom, Hutson, He, & Robinson, 2011; Bloom, Fleming, & Edington, 2014; Buyarski, Bloom, Murray, & Hutson, 2011; Walters, 2015; and Grogan, 2011). In addition, the nature of the framework allows it to be utilized with a wide variety of student populations: first generation, at-risk, undergraduate, graduate, students with disabilities, student-athletes, international, etc. (Beer, Livingston, & Tobacyk, 2011; Dial, 2015; Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, and Atwood, 2007; Saunders & Hutson, 2012; Ormsby, 2010; Stanback & McEvoy, 2012; Elliott, 2012; Palmer, 2009; Crisp, 2013; and Lyons, Sandeford-Lyons, & Singleton, 2010) .

**Appreciative Mindset (AM).** Both Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Advising are grounded upon and promote the development and use of an appreciative mindset. According to Bloom, Hutson He, and Konkle (2013), the appreciative mindset involves looking for the best in

others and in organizations instead of using our default tendency to look for the worst. Thus, developing an appreciative mindset means that individuals create a cognitive propensity within themselves to look for that which is generative, life giving, and positive in the world around them. Doing so “serves as a powerful cognitive tuning device that appears to trigger in the perceiver an increased capacity to (1) perceive the successes of another . . . , (2) access from memory the positive rather than negative aspects of the other . . . , and (3) perceive ambiguous situations for the positive rather than the negative possibilities” (Cooperrider, 2003, p. 38).

**AI + AA + AM = Appreciative Education (AE)**. This Appreciative Mindset, once combined with the practices of Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Advising forms the foundation for Appreciative Education by combining them to create a “framework for delivering high-quality education on both an individual and organizational level. It provides an intentional and positive approach to bettering educational enterprises by focusing on the strengths and potential of individuals and organizations to accomplish co-created goals” (Bloom, Hutson, He, and Konkle, 2013, pp. 5-6). The theoretical infrastructure of AE includes “social constructivism, positive psychology, and appreciative inquiry” (Bloom, Hutson, He, and Konkle, 2013, p. 6).

### **APPLYING A.E. TO HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION**

Bloom, Hutson, He and Konkle (2013, p. 9) proposed six ideas for using the Appreciative Education framework to deliver “innovative practices that develop individuals and organizations and optimize performance.” These include: positive interactions, reciprocal learning, holistic engagement, strategic design, appreciative leadership, and intentional change. This paper focuses on how higher education administrators can harness the power of this Appreciative Education framework to create appreciative work environments where employees feel their contributions are valued and where they are empowered and encouraged to contribute their ideas for optimizing their organization’s performance and fulfilling the institution’s purpose amidst the challenges of the higher education environment. Using the six phases of the Appreciative Education framework as a guide, we will demonstrate how administrators can create such a culture of innovation.

**Disarm**. The disarm phase involves creating a safe and welcoming environment (Bloom, Hutson, and He, 2008). This is especially important in higher education settings where there is a general lack of trust between faculty, staff, and administrators. Evidence of this mistrust includes the common saying that faculty who take on administration positions have gone to the “dark” side or the displeasure that staff often feel with regards to bureaucratic, political processes that impede

change. Tragically, this tension between administrators, faculty, and staff has had a significant impact on the effectiveness of administrators and, consequently, the institutions they lead. For example, Kramer's (2009) research found that:

Individuals who were primed to expect a possible abuse of trust looked more carefully for signs of untrustworthy behavior from prospective partners. In contrast, those primed with more positive social expectations paid more attention to evidence of others' trustworthiness. Most important, individuals' subsequent decisions about how much to trust the prospective partners were swayed by those expectations. (p. 71)

Given the power of such priming and the bias toward distrust of administrators in higher education, the need for new administrators to make solid first impressions and/or for more seasoned administrators to focus on changing negative perceptions is tremendous. Doing so requires that administrators not only build positive relationships, but that they "disarm" negative perceptual biases through intentional efforts to establish and build trust.

Trust is an essential element of leadership effectiveness and is largely based on the perception followers have of a leader in relation to five important characteristics: integrity, competence, loyalty, openness, and consistency (Butler & Cantrell, 1984; Schindler & Thomas, 1993)

When followers perceive leaders as possessing integrity, they are perceived as "being perfectly honest and truthful" (Butler & Cantrell, 1984, p. 22). This demonstration of character, which, in relational dynamics, requires that leaders not only live according to their own values and keep their word, but also that they behave consistently with the espoused values of those they lead.

Competence refers to the ability of leaders to perform their roles and responsibilities based on possession of the necessary knowledge and skills to do so (Butler & Cantrell, 1984). It is important to note, however, that to build trust it is not actual competence that matters, but also perceived competence. Not only must a leader be competent, they must also effectively communicate their competence (Zenger & Folkman, 2002) so that others consider them competent. Doing so is essential if leaders wish to be trusted and respected.

The third essential component of trust is consistency, which refers to the extent to which a leader "handles situations reliably, predictably, and with good judgment" (Butler & Cantrell, 1984, p. 22). This should be accompanied by the fourth and fifth elements: Loyalty and openness. Loyalty refers to the willingness of a leader to concern him or herself with protecting and serving the other person. Openness references ones willingness to "share ideas and information" (Butler & Cantrell, 1984, p. 22).

While all of these elements are important, the research suggests that “integrity (i.e., honesty and truthfulness) and competence (i.e., technical or interpersonal skill knowledge) are the most critical characteristics that an individual looks for in determining trustworthiness” (Schindler & Thomas, 1993, p. 571). As a result, leaders who wish to “disarm” those they lead by establishing trust should immediately do so by demonstrating integrity, competence, loyalty, openness, and consistency, with a particular emphasis on demonstrating honesty and competence.

Some of the practices that enable administrators to effectively disarm others include: engaging emotional intelligence, seeking others ideas, actively listening, openly sharing information, and actively looking for ways to support and assist others.

Engaging emotional intelligence is another essential component of trust building. Emotional intelligence refers to one’s capacity to monitor and manage one’s own emotions and to recognize and appropriately respond to and influence the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Consequently, emotional intelligence is an essential element of leadership and has a significant impact on leadership effectiveness (Goleman, 2000; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Research suggests that individuals who exhibit positive emotions achieve higher status in groups and spread their emotions more readily via emotional contagion (Kilduff & Galinsky, 2013). In addition, the sharing of positive emotional states via empathic interaction is a contributor to relationship formation and trust building (Cameron, 2008; Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Thus the ability to convey positive emotion to others is an essential skill for administrators in higher education.

Another essential trust building behavior involves actively seeking others input and listening effectively (Bernthal, 2006; Editorial Staff, 2000; Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Nadler & Simerly, 2006; Schultz, 1998; Vasher, 2010). When new administrators take the time to meet with and listen to the perspectives of those they are leading, they demonstrate that they are open to and interested in the needs and perspectives of others. When they follow up on what they have heard by openly sharing information and engaging in behaviors that support and serve others based on what they have shared, trust is further extended (Willemyns, Gallois, & Callan, 2003) . Such an approach, when used in combination with intentional trust formation and emotionally intelligent leadership, helps to disarm and prepare the institutional environment for change.

**Discover.** Once administrators have effectively disarmed the people they are leading, the next step is to build on the trust established by discovering and disclosing the positive capacity within themselves as well as the people and the organizations they lead (Cooperrider & Whitney,

2003, p. 12). Whereas traditional administrators focus on recognizing and responding to problems, appreciative administrators take a different approach. As Cooperrider and Whitney (2003) explained, “Appreciative inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them” (p. 7). Thus appreciative administrators first focus on increasing their awareness of the positive capacity inherent in themselves before seeking to learn about the positive capacity of the people and organizations they lead.

Appreciative administrators have a number of tools for discovering their own positive capacity to lead. While research-based assessments such as StrengthsQuest, the VIA Signature Strengths assessment, and other similar inventories can be helpful in the self-discovery process, administrators can also engage in self-reflection regarding their own strengths and achievements. In addition, they can ask trusted others to answer questions such as:

1. When have you seen me at my best as an administrator?
2. What do you appreciate most about my approach to administration and leadership?
3. What is the greatest strength I bring to our team as an administrator?

While it may initially feel uncomfortable asking others to answer these questions, generally trusted colleagues are happy to provide answers and feedback. The insights gleaned from doing so can be powerful as administrators learn about the fundamental strengths that give life to their efforts to lead and influence others. Given the value of such feedback, administrators who ask these questions of others should also take advantage of the opportunity to tell their trusted colleagues how they would answer these questions if asked about them.

Regardless of the methods used, however, the objective of the Discover phase is to identify the core individual strengths that the administrator brings to the table in terms of leading and managing people, programs, and resources effectively. This does not mean that such leaders ignore their weaknesses. As Clifton and Harter (2003) explained, “the strength based organization does not ignore weakness, but rather achieves optimization, where talents are focused and built upon and weaknesses are understood and managed” (p. 112). Therefore, administrators, once they become aware of their own strengths, focus on organizing their work to draw upon these strengths to achieve objectives. At the same time, they work to find ways to partner with others to mitigate the impact of their weaknesses (an individual who is very visionary but struggles to develop tactical plans would intentionally involve others who are strong in this area in the planning process) (Clifton & Harter, 2003). By so doing, they ensure that they are giving their best to the organization by constantly engaging their strengths. This does not suggest that they do not ever focus on improving



upon weaknesses, in some cases this is essential (Zenger & Folkman, 2002); nonetheless, they spend most of their time functioning from a place of strength.

After discovering their own strengths and positive capacity, administrators should actively and intentionally seek to understand the unique strengths and positive capacity of their co-workers. A Gallup research study revealed that “Top performing managers (based on composite performance) were more likely to indicate that they spend time with high producers, match talents to tasks, and emphasize strengths versus seniority in making personnel decisions” (p. 116). They also found that when people are able to do what they do best on a daily basis, their organizations “are more productive, have higher customer loyalty, and have lower turnover” (p. 119). Consequently, leaders must develop an understanding of the strengths of those they lead. To do so, once again, leaders may use strength-oriented assessments to identify follower strengths. However, meeting with each report individually to get to know their unique stories and strengths is essential. Examples of Discover questions that administrators can use to learn more about their reports include:

1. Tell me about a time that you positively impacted someone else’s life.
2. Tell me about a time when you felt most alive, engaged, and/or fulfilled here at work.
3. What is your proudest accomplishment ever in a work setting?

In addition, administrators can use the following techniques for better understanding the unique strengths that each report brings to the workplace:

1. Observe them in action, paying particular attention to their strengths that help them to achieve success
2. Pay attention to projects and topics that excite employees
3. Facilitate group discussions that increase awareness of individual and group strengths and how to apply these to the work of the team

Finally, in addition to discovering their own strengths and those of followers, administrators must discover the inherent life giving characteristics of and the positive capacity inherent within the environments in which they work. Doing so requires an understanding of organizational contexts, deep listening, and intense dialogue with others.

Organizational contexts are systemic in nature. Each context involves the use of resources that are available within the environment to accomplish specific tasks or outcomes through the actions of people within and beyond the immediate environment. Thus contexts represent systems. A system is a “group of interacting, interrelated or interdependent components that form a complex and unified whole” (Anderson & Johnson, 1997, p. 2). Generally systems are purposeful, self-

stabilizing, feedback dependent, and change oriented. To generate awareness of the systemic situations in which administrators find themselves, they must listen and dialogue with others about these environments so as to gain a better understanding of them.

The kind of listening that is necessary to understand systems requires more than just hearing. Instead it combines input from all of the senses through intentional exploration of one's environment that is focused on discovering the life giving capacities within the system. To facilitate this process of organizational discovery, questions like the following can be used to unearth the strengths of the team:

1. What are the core strengths of all of the key stakeholders in our organization?
2. What are the most valuable resources that we have available to us?
3. What elements of the environment hold the greatest positive capacity for contributing to change?
4. What are the inherent strengths and capacities that we possess when we engage in collaborative work that go beyond our own individual strengths?
5. What has been our greatest success so far as a team? What were the factors that contributed to our success? What were we doing? How were we doing these things?

Such conversations generate an awareness of the situation that, when combined with awareness of self and others, contribute to our capacity to generate a compelling sense of purpose, which is the goal of the Dream phase.

**Dream.** As administrators generate a collective awareness of themselves, those they lead, and the organizations they lead, they 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. These dreams are not ethereal projections of vague possibilities, but rather probable futures grounded in and built upon the best of what already exists in the organization. As Cooperrider and Whitney (2003) explained, "As people are brought together to listen carefully to the innovations and moments of organizational 'life,' sometimes in story telling modes and sometimes in interpretive and analytical modes, a convergence zone is created where the future begins to be discerned in the form of visible patterns interwoven into the texture of the actual" (p. 13). The key here is that the dream stage must be collective in nature. Appreciative administrators facilitate the co-creation of shared visions of powerful future possibilities, they do not dictate these. In order to do so, they encourage stakeholders to develop images of probable futures based on the use of the strengths within individuals and organizations. Second, they invite

them to share these openly in order to generate a shared dream for the future (Orem, Binkert, & Clancy, 2007). This is achieved through discussion of powerful questions in group contexts.

Given the purposeful nature of systems, the first and perhaps most essential question that administrators need to address is what is the ideal reality that the current environment is capable of bringing forth? Or what is the ideal state that we are trying to achieve? This can typically be discovered through dialogue with individuals within the situation where questions such as these are discussed and explored. Through the use of such provocative propositions, a powerful vision for the future is established that is deeply meaningful and broadly shared.

To better understand how to develop such dreams, it is valuable to understand that an appreciative dream includes three components that represent the outcomes of the dream phase of action: “a vision of a better world, a powerful purpose, and a compelling statement of strategic intent” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2003, p. 14). A vision for a better world is developed as groups and teams respond to the question of what is possible? A vision is a statement of what the future reality will look like based on a realistic commitment to pursuing the greatness and potential inherent within the organization. This powerful vision both pull people towards it and paints a picture of what it takes to achieve it. People are then drawn to initiate and create it by both plausibility and power. Its detail and descriptiveness provide the information needed to bring the vision to fruition. A question that can be used to unleash these co-created dreams might be:

Pretend it is five years from now and we have just won an award from our professional society for being the most innovative organization amongst its members – what specific innovations are we being recognized for? How does our workplace look different than it does now?

A powerful purpose refers to a strong overarching answer to the question of why are we doing this? Why does this matter? Why do we want this dream to become a reality? A clear and compelling answer to such questions is a powerful source of motivation and resilience (Frankl, 1984 2000). As a result, leaders need to not only facilitate the creation of a what (the dream), but also a why (the motivation). The final component of a powerful dream is a statement of strategic intent. The purpose of this statement is two-fold. It begins to answer the question of how and compels individuals into action. It also moves the group that is being led into the design stage.

**Design.** In appreciative inquiry, “the design phase involves the creation of the organization’s social architecture. This new social architecture is embedded in the organization by generating provocative propositions that embody the organizational dream in the ongoing

activities” (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. 40). In the appreciative education model, this typically involves the development of “an action plan where individual strengths are aligned to achieve both individual and shared dreams” through a process that is “socially constructed and self-evolving” (Bloom, Hutson, He, & Konkle, 2013, p. 9). Like the earlier phases, this phase involves the leader in the facilitation of dialogical communicative processes that involve the stakeholders of the organization in recreating the organizational architecture, or core processes, to align them more with the dream that has been established. Like traditional action planning, these redesigns are concerned with who will do what, when, and how. However, these “plans” are more likely to take the form of descriptive stories that recreate the day-to-day narrative of the organization. In this sense, they have a lot in common with the scenarios generated in scenario planning (Chermack, 2011; Kahane, 2004). As Cooperider, Whitney, and Stavros (2003) explained, “the design phase defines the basic structure that will allow the dream or vision to become a reality” (p. 143)

The process for doing this begins with identification of the design elements that will be addressed, such as business processes, education or training, management practices, stakeholder relations, etc. (Cooperrider et al., 2003). This is accomplished by engaging the group in discussions about the essential processes and elements that relate to the dream. Then the key relationships related to these elements are identified. This requires the group to examine who is involved or could be involved in these elements or process and examining the relationships between these entities.

Once the elements and relationships are identified, the group then discusses “what they need to put in place to make the dream a reality?” Questions like the following might be used:

1. What will we need to do more of to achieve the dream?
2. What would we need to do differently?
3. What changes to the process, relationships, structures, etc. would really make the dream a reality?
4. What would we be doing more of or differently if the dream were already a reality?

As the administrator facilitates dialogue around these questions, the group develops a shared plan of action for change. Leaders should be sure to capture the information that is being conveyed. This information can then be converted into a more traditional action plan by delineated who will do what, when, and how.

**Deliver.** The narrative action planning processes just described, transition the group into the deliver (aka destiny) stage. In the appreciative education model, this stage is a stage of execution. In this stage, leaders and followers work collaboratively and supportively to make the

dream a reality. Doing so requires administrators to ensure that all those involved regularly connect, cooperate, and co-create the stories developed in the design phase to achieve the dream (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2003).

These three components, connect, cooperate, and co-create are essential because most of us have been involved in change processes where action plans have been developed and implementation begins, but no real change ever occurs. This may be due to employees' assumptions and perceptions that once the plans are developed that the hard work is done. Unfortunately, the real challenge of leadership is keeping people's attention and efforts focused on doing those things that matter most in spite of distractions and competing priorities. In traditional control-oriented processes, this is done by regular reports or meetings and constant monitoring of key indicators of progress. Appreciative administration, however, focuses more on the relational nature of change.

Research suggests that people who want to make changes are most successful in a context of accountability, collaboration, and social support (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Goleman et al., 2002; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Revans, 1977). Consequently, a leader needs to bring people together regularly (connect) to discuss the successes they are having and to identify further changes or actions (cooperate and collaborate) that may need to be taken to achieve the dream. In addition, administrators look for ways to ensure that people are working together to bring the dream into reality. Finally, administrators meet regularly with individuals to provide appreciative coaching (Orem et al., 2007). These interactive sessions focus on using the appreciative process to facilitate individual recognition of successes and strengths, the development of role-based dreams, the design of means for implementing these, and interacting necessary to deliver on these dreams.

**Don't Settle.** The final stage of the appreciative education model is that of don't settle. This phase embraces Kuh et al.'s (2010) notion of "positive restlessness." In a study they conducted of institutions that do a better than expected job of retaining students, Kuh et al. found that these institutions constantly strove to get better and innovate. They called this tendency to seek for continuous improvement "positive restlessness." This principle reminds administrators that while there is a need to celebrate victories and focus on our successes, on the individual, interpersonal, team and organizational levels, we cannot let awards and accomplishments deter us from constantly seeking to improve. Instead, we need to continually strive not for perfection, but for improvement. In Dweck's (2007) book *Mindset*, she asserts that it is important to adopt a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. A fixed mindset involves thinking that our ability to perform and succeed is limited by our current ability level, while the growth mindset focuses on getting better through practice.

Consequently, the six phases of Appreciative Education represent an iterative as opposed to single use process. Therefore, appreciative administrators actively practice utilizing the six phases as a guiding framework, knowing full well that the end goal is not achieving one goal and then setting the framework aside. It is a lifelong journey that strives to continually get better in order to optimize both individual and organizational potential.

## CONCLUSION

Appreciative administrators actively and intentionally seek to create a work environment that celebrates the strengths and skills of each team member and the organization as a whole as a launching pad for dreaming how to improve and then acting on the plans that are co-created as a unit. Appreciative administrators do not try to hoard power, they instead empower their employees to become the best selves in order to create an innovative organization that can step up and face the challenges facing higher education.

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