

The Appreciation Space Method:

Actively Attending to Appreciation in the Workplace

Abstract

This project was based on my research as a scholar-practitioner experimenting with different ways of using appreciation in the workplace to create a more positive, enriching environment. My workplace had become disengaging so I set out to find a way to use appreciation to create an enjoyable workspace where employees felt valued for their work. I developed a qualitative research study to put my ideas of appreciation into practice. This study included two pilot programs called the “Appreciation Board” and “15-Minute Meetings”. For this project and paper I evaluated these pilot programs and from that evaluation created a method called “Appreciation Space”. This method addresses how to actively attend to appreciation through four supporting factors that energize the Appreciation Space. This space is not a physical space but a whole-person space that allows employees’ to experience appreciation through mind, body, and spirit. Leaders energize the Appreciation Space by participating in actions like hearing employees ideas, creating a strong workplace culture and planning for employee growth. This paper will discuss my pilot programs, the development of the Appreciation Space method, and my four supporting factors of appreciation.

Keywords: appreciation, workplace, positive environment, Appreciation Space

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This project was developed based on my experiences in a disengaging workplace where employees did not feel valued for their contributions to the organization. My job title was store manager and I was leader of a 35 person retail sales team. As leader I wanted to create a more positive environment where employees knew they were appreciated. I thought by using appreciation as a team, we could make improvements, to better our store. Wanting to do a better job as leader, of showing employees their work was valued I created a group-influenced, leader-led action research study. This study focused on my main pilot program called the Appreciation Board which then expanded with a second pilot program called 15-Minute Meetings.

For this project I decided to focus on the evaluation of these pilot programs but I also wanted to explore how to put my ideas into action. In reviewing the literature I could not find an exact solution of how appreciation could be applied in the workplace to create a more positive, engaging, and supportive environment. So I decided to create the Appreciation Space method; to develop a way for leaders to actively attend to appreciation and make the overall employee experience better. This paper will focus on my pilot programs, mostly the Appreciation Board, the development of my Appreciation Space method, and understanding my four supporting factors that energize the Appreciation Space.

Background of the Pilot Programs

The pilot programs began because personally I had been struggling to keep myself engaged in my workplace, I felt dehumanized - just another cog in the wheel, getting the job done. I thought if I felt this way most likely my employees did too which I confirmed through conversations with them. Ramsey (2010) stresses the idea that “a depersonalized workplace is a soulless workplace...It’s up to leaders to humanize the workplace” (p. 12). So my goal, as

leader became how to make my store a more engaging place, where employees were genuinely respected for their day-to-day work. The idea of humanizing my workplace was rooted in the organizational development humanistic perspective described by Brun & Dugas (2008) as “concerned with recognizing people, their being, their unique, distinctive character and their existence” (p. 720). As a group we worked towards this goal by recognizing each other’s uniqueness energizing our space with appreciation through a sense of liveliness and heart. We did this by showing more kind, respectful behavior and consistently using the Appreciation Board.

The Appreciation Board, a bulletin board that displayed hand-written notes of appreciation for all to see, was my initial investigation into using appreciation in the workplace. Each employee’s name was featured on a handmade card specially designed by a creative employee. I then purchased sticky notes, cards with key chains, and oversized shout-out notes for all employees to use. As the leader I then discussed with the front-line supervisors how I wanted to show appreciation more openly through considerate behavior and by using the Appreciation Board. The supervisors then coached the staff on using appreciation, for at least two weeks in daily “spot talks”, short meetings designed to communicate tasks and coach on performance.

The other pilot program, 15-Minute Meetings, used in the latter half of my study was designed to discuss with employees their level of engagement in our workplace. In this pilot program, I used a self-designed employee engagement survey to collect information, on different aspects of how involved employees were on the job. The initial development of these two pilot programs helped me to figure out as a scholar-practitioner how to make my workplace a more

positive, appreciative environment where people knew their hard work meant something to the organization.

The timeframe of this study was over a 15 month period. The Appreciation Board was the first program, and took place over nine months, but was reintroduced twice during this time based on suggestions and changes made to fit new environments. The 15-Minute Meeting program, based on a similar one-on-one interview program I had been doing, was introduced in the last five months of the study. Redeveloping and reintroducing both these programs based on suggestions for change made this an action research study. Two months after completing the study, based on my evaluation of it, I created The Appreciation Space method to address how leaders could make the workplace more involved through appreciation.

Evaluation of the Pilot Programs

When I initiated the Appreciation Board I decided to engage the whole staff in appreciation and investigate the positives which built on Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry method. Cooperrider & Avital (2005), in describing the method of Appreciative Inquiry, state "Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them"; they go on to discuss that it is discovering what gives a system life when it is at its best (p. 11). In using Appreciative Inquiry I wanted to know the best of my staff and our system and I knew using appreciation and the Appreciation Board was just the start of this journey.

Results of the Pilot Programs

The Appreciation Board was a success and positive results were seen within the first week as the staff demonstrated more energized, enthusiastic, and respectful behavior. Within the first month I saw frequent use of appreciation resulting in a more supportive, happy, and

motivated team that was having fun. Employees interacted with customers in a playful and informative manner suggesting products that resulted in increased sales. The notes of appreciation on the Appreciation Board expressed little acts like helping with a stock list to big acts like preventing a negative customer experience. I observed that these notes of appreciation reflected our store values, such as respecting co-workers and creating an exceptional customer service experience. The results of the 15-Minute Meeting program showed employees were engaged in their daily tasks but as a leader there was opportunity for me to create a more interactive environment. Overall the results, of the 15-Minute Meetings, were that employees praised store leader and co-worker connectedness but wanted more task variety and a chance to keep learning new things.

Challenges also resulted with the pilot programs. These challenges included how to train employees well so that they fully understood my vision of appreciation in our workplace. Employees were dedicated to using appreciation in their actions but some saw the Appreciation Board as a performance management tool which was not the intention and took away from the fun of the program. Another challenge was working with employees who were resistant to the change of openly engaging in appreciation in the workplace. In the 15-Minute Meeting program the major difficulty was finding time to conduct the interviews in a non-rushed manner. Lastly in reflection, when initially training my staff, I never truly explained my expectations or defined appreciation for them. This contributed too many of these challenges. So considering this, I realized I needed to define “appreciation in the workplace” and clearly analyze it before I could teach others how to use appreciation.

Defining Appreciation in the Workplace

The root of all my work, in my action research study, was to humanize the workplace to make it a more enjoyable, positive and appreciative environment. In my study I began to accomplish this by recognizing my employees' human uniqueness and allowing them to be their authentic selves in the workplace. This helped my team feel more supported and validated in our environment. Taking this into consideration, the definition of "appreciation in the workplace" became ensuring employees feel valued for their work by recognizing their contributions, humanity, spirit and authentic-self within the organizational environment. Using spirit within the definition builds on Barge & Oliver's (2003) appreciative spirit as "creating conversation around life-giving forces within organizations and by developing a consensus around these positive themes" (p. 126). This also aligns with Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry method in that the human spirit, represented the best of my team, and it was part of what gave our system life (Cooperrider & Avital, 2005).

This definition of appreciation in the workplace honors employees in a holistic way: spiritually, psychologically and physically. Putting this definition of appreciation into practice respects the employee and creates a more personalized place where they feel appreciated and supported by leadership. Leaders can practice this definition by allowing employees to voice opinions, participate in decision-making, and offer growth within the organization.

Developing the Appreciation Space Method

Appreciation in my workplace was beneficial, but to be truly effective with it, I knew leaders would need to do more than simply posting up an Appreciation Board. When developing the Appreciation Space method, I decided that it would be a prescriptive method, because the intention is to teach leaders how to actively use appreciation in an organization. The idea of

Appreciation Space builds on Meyer's (2010) descriptive method of "Playspace". The goal of space in Playspace is that it is not a physical space but rather a mind-set where people feel confident to play, innovate, learn, and collaborate. Appreciation Space is similar; it is not a physical space but it is less a mindset, and more a way employees experience appreciation in a holistic way. They experience appreciation through four supporting factors which are standards, culture, awareness and vision. The Appreciation Space is an emotional, whole-person space that is energized when employees experience appreciation through the supporting factors. This method is more than just saying thank you - it takes a deep commitment from leadership to incorporate gratitude into their regular management practices to energize this space. When the space is energized, employees are more likely to be engaged in their work, and they want to go the extra mile for the organization.

Encouraging Employee Engagement

Through observations and conversations during my study, I realized employees felt more valued and became more engaged in the workplace when we actively used appreciation. Customer service improved, and employees found creative ways to use the sales script. They also involved customers in energetic conversation which resulted in adding on items to customers' transactions. Employee engagement is more than employee satisfaction - it recognizes a person's true contribution. Mastrangelo (2009) describes employee engagement as "found in employees' minds, hearts and hands. We expect engaged employees to decide to continue working for their employer, to feel pride and motivation working for their employer, and to be willing to exert extra energy at work for their employer" (p.14).

Employees want to be involved and contribute to their organization as stated by Perschel (2010), "employees want to be engaged, companies benefit when they are, and it is neither costly

nor difficult to achieve” (p. 30). Maylett & Nielsen (2012) explain in the article *There is No Cookie-Cutter Approach to Engagement* that employee engagement is “defined as a voluntary dedication and commitment to doing the very best work” (p.59). This article goes on to explain there is no exact method to employee engagement but there is an urgent need to nurture it because there are ties between engaged employees and quality customer service, profitability, and productivity. This was evident in pilot program evaluation, as the more I engaged employees with appreciation they were eager to contribute to the organization. Appreciation is deeper than issuing a yearly bonus – it is creating engaged employees to energize the Appreciation Space and this is done by leaders consistently attending to the four supporting factors.

Four Supporting Factors of Appreciation

In developing the Appreciation Space method I realized through my own experience and in reading the literature that employees wanted to experience appreciation in all aspects of their work life. This is why I created the supporting factors, sticking with my goal to humanize the workplace, so that leaders can understand how to meet the human need of feeling validated and that one’s work has meaning.

Standards.

Standards are clearly stated and understood organizational values, goals, and expectations. Standards in Appreciation Space build on Kouzes & Posner’s (2003) idea of giving employees principles to live by and use in their daily work. They define standards as a shared set of goals and values or principles. Clearly stating values and goals as a base to work from also identifies with adult learning theory. Adult learners are self-directed in their learning and benefit from clearly set criterion so they can use them as a foundation to conduct their daily

work (MacKeracher, 2010). When standards are clear employees have a baseline from which to make wise decisions, collaborate with co-workers and customers, and be engaged in learning.

Understanding values allows employees to build a strong foundation from which to base all their work. Employees are more driven, especially in customer service, when they understand that appreciation and recognition is reflected in the organization's goals and values (Bielaszka-DuVernay, 2007). Zappos, an online retailer, is a leader in using core values to guide business goals and employee expectations. Tony Hsieh (2010), the CEO of Zappos, throughout his book *Delivering Happiness* shares practical examples from employees on how they use ten core values in daily leadership and customer interactions. Hsieh states that many organizations have core values but do not commit to them, but at Zappos he states "by commit, we mean that you're willing to hire and fire based on them" (p.154). These values are non-negotiable and they are lived by every day. Employees at Zappos know how to confidently make decisions, interact with customers, set their limits, and collaborate every day based on these ten core values.

Culture.

Workplace culture within the Appreciation Space method means connectedness to leaders and co-workers, a collaborative environment full of inquiry, fun, and personalized recognition. Recognition is important in actively using appreciation but it is only a component. There is a challenge in making the distinction between recognition and appreciation. In the practitioner literature the words are often used interchangeably but there is a difference. Appreciation is shown in all actions whereas recognition is used to point out special achievements. Recognition needs to be genuine and personalized for it to be considered authentic. A simple thank you across the organization, like a monetary bonus, is not going to be as effective as a personalized acknowledgment.

While recognition is the dominating factor in culture within the Appreciation Space method connectedness to leaders and co-workers, collaboration, inquiry and a fun/playful environment are equally as important to show appreciation. Connectedness with leaders, co-workers and expanding an internal network optimizes collaboration and inquiry. Harper (2010) encourages organizations to support employees in creating an internal network because friendship in the workplace can increase job satisfaction and strengthen collaboration. Meyer (2010), in her book *From Workspace to Playspace*, states that incorporating play into a culture allows for employees to be able to respond quickly, be flexible and adapt to organizational change. Play is not just a way to interject some fun but a way to make employees more flexible with change and creative in problem-solving.

Awareness.

Leadership awareness sets the example for all employees' use of appreciation in the workplace. Awareness includes being mindful, setting an example, being on the ground with employees, and respecting the role that emotions have in the organizational environment. Emotions are frequently ignored or expected to be pushed away on the job but they contribute significantly to employees' performance and learning. Leaders need to be emotionally intelligent and recognize how emotions affect meaning-making in adult learning (Dirkx, 2001). When employees feel positive emotions in seeing their leader using appreciation it will result in a positive emotional reaction and employees will want to follow the leader's example.

An aware leader is mindful of interacting with employees on a regular basis and makes sure to put the organizational values into action when connecting with employees. When leaders are mindful of their own behavior employees will follow their example, as Kouzes & Posner (2003), state "nothing communicates more clearly than what the leaders *do*" (p. 135). When

leaders are on the ground with employees it offers the opportunity for employees to see for themselves the leader in action and setting the example of showing appreciation. The leader then shows that they value the Appreciation Space method and know the expectations of using appreciation themselves.

In evaluating my pilot programs I learned how impactful leadership awareness can be, as the lack of it affected my employees' workplace engagement. When conducting interviews for 15-Minute Meetings, my secondary pilot program, a particular example repeatedly came forward about the lack of awareness from the corporate leadership team. It was a specific incident that happened on the night of our new store move. Employees noticed two members of the leadership team, who came to help for one evening, were taking an extended break chatting outside the store. Employees felt extremely discouraged that these key members of the leadership team were not setting the example of hard work. The staff felt that if their leaders were not being accountable for getting the job done why should they work hard serving customers?

As a result of this incident, as confirmed through conversations with employees, they had become frustrated and because of this they were letting their emotions control them in co-worker interactions and were confrontational with me as their direct manager. Zigarmi, Blanchard, Essary & Houson (2010) in the white paper *The Leadership-Profit Chain* stress "The way that leaders treat employees is the way that employees will treat the customer" (p. 5). Awareness in the Appreciation Space method is crucial because it not only shows employees are appreciated but also sets the example how they should behave.

Vision.

To reach the goal, of making a more humanized space, leaders need to plan for employee growth, learning and offer opportunities to celebrate together. It takes vision on behalf of leaders

to continually energize the Appreciation Space by regularly attending to appreciation and creating this whole-person, emotional space for employees. New leaders need to be developed on the value of the Appreciation Space method if there is to be continued success.

Employee growth takes vision by challenging both leaders and employees to continually seek new learning opportunities. In evaluating interviews from my pilot program 15-Minute Meetings, I noticed, growth opportunities for full-time employees were vital but more importantly were continued learning opportunities for all employees. Many part-time staff members were interested in learning new things to create more task variety for themselves. The overall message on growth was that employees wanted to keep learning in their role to fend off boredom, discover new skills, and be more versatile within the team environment. Giving employees opportunity for growth and learning shows foresight and challenges employees to have vision of their own.

Vision in the Appreciation Space method also includes creating events where everyone can celebrate success together. Leadership needs to look to the future to plan and achieve long-term organizational goals. Kouzes & Posner (2003) stress the importance of celebrating together because it is a time when all employees can come together to cheer each other on for reaching a shared goal. As a result networks are strengthened, the culture enriched, and opportunities are created for connectedness among employees and leaders (Chapman & White, 2011).

Participating in my action research study and evaluating my pilot programs gave me a passion to start the discussion on improving workplaces through appreciation. The Appreciation Space method helps leaders by giving them direction on actively attending to appreciation and energizing the Appreciation Space which engages employees' minds, hearts, and hands.

Energizing this space creates a more positive, engaged workplace where employees feel their hard work means something.

Further Study

There are many opportunities for further study connected to using appreciation in the workplace and applying the Appreciation Space method. The most prominent that I would like to investigate is a “phase two” of this project: designing a learning program for organizational leaders on how to use the method. Furthermore, I would like to investigate the influence on employee engagement levels when the leader energizes the Appreciation Space.

Conclusion

Appreciation in the workplace is not just a concept to me as a scholar-practioner - it is a passion. Through this project I hope conversation will spark on how to use appreciation in the workplace to create a more positive workplace environment where employees can feel valued for their work. Leaders need to recognize the definition of appreciation and how it respects workers humanity and values employees' contributions to the organization. By setting standards, cultivating a culture, acting in awareness, and inspiring vision the goal of creating a more positive, engaged workplace for all employees can be reached through the Appreciation Space method.

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