

## **The Role of Appreciative Language in Organizational Culture**

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## Abstract

This paper introduces the role of appreciative language in organizational culture. The paper is a theoretical research aiming to explore the concept of appreciative language, and how it influences the organizational culture. The organizational culture is a model of fundamental presumptions that a group of employees constructed, discovered, or developed through learning, in order to cope with the external situations, such as adaptation of the organization or the integration of its new members. Thus, the beliefs and the presumptions may be defined as mental constructs that greatly influence how members interpret, act and how they relate to these. Finally, the paper emphasized the responsibility of the leader that maintains and promotes the organizational culture through the language used. The appreciative language appears as a defining element that contributes to the development and consolidation of the organization.

**Keywords:** organizational culture, appreciative inquiry, language, leader

### 1. The organization and its actors

The organizational field is constantly changing. Appreciative inquiry aims to change the organization; it focuses on exploring what is good and successful, but also on the strengths of an organization (Cooperrider, 2001). People and organizations influence each other in a cyclical, continuous and dynamic way. The success and the organizational change depend on his members and on their abilities to communicate and to work in team (Andrus, 2010). The organizations are designed to be flexible and also to be able to adapt on the labor market, to find new strategies or to redress their activity. A good collaboration between the leader and the concept of the organization will create a broad framework of manifestation and more resources. On the other hand, organizations are able to become more productive, with an organizational culture, more competitive and more resistant to internal or external problems (Barett, 1995).

The language and the words are the foundation of social life, in line with the post-modernist view of language, seen as an active agent in creating meanings (Gergen, 2009; Gergen & Gergen, 2012). Therefore, the theory is coded in words or in imagines, has the force to model the social organization, because we see what we believe (Sandu, 2009). At the global, general human level, communication acquires new meanings for the modern human being. Theoretical research, but also the daily practice, reconsiders the role of effective communication, in all plans and every minute, seen as a key factor in ensuring a happy and successful life (Pânișoara & Pânișoara, 2007). The word communication has become the pillar of our evolution. We consider, therefore, that the success of any organization lies in the ability of its actors to make that true communication, which goes beyond the stage of trivialities or formalities, which allows listening and understanding. Leaders thus become important factors for how this communication manifests at tall the levels of organization (Sandu, 2009). They need to know in depth all sides of this extremely diverse phenomenon, removing it from crisis or disaster, or responding appropriately to decisive critical moments, in order to become appreciative leaders (Socorro & Fernando, 2010).

To appreciate means to value the action and to recognize the positive aspects in people, affirming the past and present strengths, identifying potentialities, perceiving those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to the system (Sandu, 2009). Thatchenkery & Metzker (2008)

believe that the term of appreciation refers to the process of selectivity and the judgment of the value or positive use of something and that "people who succeed in life have a conscious or unconscious ability to see everyday reality - events, situations, obstacles, and products and people appreciatively" (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2008, p. 9). The practical approach of the appreciative methods starts from the appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1994) but we also talk about the appreciative management of human resources, the appreciative counseling, the appreciative supervision, the appreciative leadership, the appreciative community development. Due to the affirmative character (focusing on the inherent positivity and the valorization of the co-transforming elements), we prefer to use the name of affirmative-appreciative methods. The term affirmative is not a novelty in the specialized literature, being introduced by Cooperrider (2001) to underline the "optimism" that characterizes the application of appreciative methods.

People with appreciative intelligence can be good leaders and also to enjoy a great success. Appreciative intelligence helps us to explain what the thinking behind the success of some people is. Theoretically, appreciative intelligence is based on the ability to redefine context (see that seed in another way), the power to identify positive elements (such as evolving, what would bring new, what would help that seed) and, most importantly, identifying the future scenario (how that seed can influence the future in the future). It has been shown from some studies that individuals who possess appreciative intelligence express their (positive type) influence on those around them deliberately. They try to stimulate them, to give them clues to follow the path, to optimize them, to help them become more persevering, to become creative, to show tolerance for uncertainties. "Appreciative intelligence does not just mean having a positive way of seeing things (Barett, 1995, p. 23). It is a skill that corresponds to the intentional and generative acts. Appreciative intelligence allows us to consider painful actions as part of history not of the present and to see them an opportunity to devise a different way of acting, capable of leading us to a better future. Therefore appreciative intelligence does not mean to deny the existence of a part of reality. It is the ability to recapture that part in a broader perspective (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2008).

## 2. Organizational culture

The organization is a group of individuals or legal entities having an independent structure, its own patrimony used to achieve a purpose, and legal personality. It has three internal dimensions, which are constantly coordinating and synchronizing. *The structure* of the organization contains all its formal and tangible characteristics. It refers to the official objectives and the explicit strategies, the architectural and concrete aspects of the organization, its physical basis and its use, "the policies and rules of operation, the systems installed for the strategic administration of human resources, as well as the control and the monitoring of the operations, the hierarchical relations and the explicit forms of leadership and exercise of power" (Stanciu & Ionescu, 2005, p. 15). The second dimension is *culture*, where values, beliefs, traditions and formalism of organization are included. It brings together the organizational aspects in a collective system of symbolic meanings and most often exerts a special influence on the premises of the decisions, on the behaviors and actions of the managers, but also of the personnel. Geertz (1973) described culture as a software that makes the mechanism of a society work. Third, it is about *individuals*, leaders and staff at all hierarchical

levels. Equipped with different capacities, knowledge and specific skills, they continuously interpret organizational events and behave according to the assumptions and expectations that are the result of their own experiences. According to their status and hierarchical position, they may contribute to constructing and remodeling the culture and structure of the organization (Stanciu & Ionescu, 2005).

Specialty literature shows us that there is no unanimously accepted definition by specialists regarding the concept of organizational culture. This became an important study topic of management science in the 1980s. Geert Hofstede (1980), Thomas Peters & Richard Waterman (1982), Terrence Deal & Allan Kennedy (1982) are authors whose work has generated the explosion of research on the concept of organizational culture. This does not mean that the concerns for the culture of organizations have not been manifested until then, but the specialists focused on observing, analyzing and investigating component elements that did not fall under the umbrella of a synthesizing term. For example initially, values, beliefs, symbols, myths or norms were also in the theoretical interest. However, culture, has gained its priority, becoming an important actor and even a raw material in the design of economic development and business. It represents the identity, the label and the way of individualization of an organizational group, being dominated by characteristics of the national culture as long as its members are the result of specific cultural stereotypes (Stanciu & Ionescu, 2005). Organizational culture, a collection of shared values, opinions and beliefs, also includes competitiveness, social responsibility, support for innovation and performance (Jafari, Abbaspour & Azizishomami, 2013). Organizational culture can be created with management support at all levels in such a way as to encourage both knowledge sharing and interactions between members of the organization (Bercerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2004). Thus, culture has an influence on individual and organizational behavior, but also in reverse (Cameron, 2008). According to Peters & Waterman (1982), organizational culture responds to the satisfaction of primordial human needs such as the need for meaning, control, positive feedback, the need for stability and security or ideological needs that structure the purpose, direction, meaning of the organization and action accordingly.

Edgar Schein (1984) believes that organizational culture is a model of fundamental presumptions that a group of employees have created, discovered or developed through learning, in order to cope with the situations arising regarding the external adaptation of the organization and/or integration of group members. These assumptions work well enough that they can be considered valid and worthy of being transmitted to new members about how they should perceive, think, and relate to these situations (Schein, 1984). Schein's definition emphasizes an important aspect of organizational culture, namely the role of beliefs and presumptions that can be defined as mental forms and constructs that greatly influence how we interpret different events and actions within the organization and how we relate to them. Often, these assumptions and beliefs are accepted as true and valid, rarely being evaluated or questioned.

Therefore, there are two levels of organizational culture, the visible, displayed or external and the profound or inward. The external level is observed in the dress code at the workplace, in the way the offices are arranged, in the existing behavioral model, in the way the members of the organization treat their clients/beneficiaries. The profound level, from the inside of the

organizational culture is formed by values that underlie the beliefs, the employees' opinions that influence their behavior and attitude, giving birth and outlining the visible aspects of the culture. These values, beliefs, opinions, behaviors are essential to the culture of a strong organization and not infrequently are made public in official statements of mission and purpose (Peters & Waterman, 1982). They are established, maintained and developed by the managers of the organization and are given a symbolic value over time: the symbols are translated into organization-specific „metaphors”, in specific language that uses these values to describe events, performance, clients/beneficiaries and competition. Managers use all of these elements in their language, to preserve and maintain the organizational culture, as well as to help maintain and enhance the image of the organization so that an organization can be identified through its culture (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Vârgă, 2007).

### **3. Language – element of organizational culture**

Members of organization, including its leader, contribute to consolidation, maintenance and development of the organizational culture. Among the main ways of transmitting, maintaining and developing culture is socialization within the organization (Louis, 1990). When socialization is effective, members understand and assume the central norms and values of the organization, thus ensuring coordination between employees who thereby have access to a framework, a model of effective response to different situations that arise in this context (Niehaus-Bauer et. al., 1998). How else could we effectively socialize, if not through language, be it verbal, nonverbal or paraverbal. Language is the communication system composed of articulated sounds, specifically to people, through which they express their thoughts, feelings and desires. Language is an individual phenomenon, subjective and involves two dimensions: the active one, responsible for the transmission of signals and the passive one, involved in the reception and interpretation of signals; the two sides can only constitute the language together. In case of oral language, the active side is speech and the passive one is listening, and regarding the written language, the active side is writing while the passive one is reading (Zlate, 2006). Language appears in several forms, depending on different criteria, but in the organizational context we are interested in the analysis of verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal language.

Verbal (oral) language consists in producing audible signals that can be perceived by others and the reception of such signals emitted by others. It is the fundamental form of language, being used most often. Verbal language is the first form of language that appears in ontogenetic development, the other forms being based on it (Cioara, 2014). The main functions of verbal language are those of communication and knowledge. Oral language has a situational character, meaning that it is always carried out in a context given by personal interactions, being dependent on it and sustained, oriented and directed by the reactions of the interlocutors. Depending on the number of interlocutors, oral language can take the form of monologue, dialogue and colloquium (Cioara, 2014). The use of nonverbal language in communication refers to applying facial expressions, eye movement, physical appearance, body movements and gestures, tactile messages, vocal characteristics, “conditioned by the use of time, spatial dynamics and the implications of gender and age, ethnicity and social status differences that intervenes in all these areas. This label

implies the interpretation of gestures, mimics, postures, behavior and discovering meanings that make all these signs a language, whether they accompany and support verbal language, whether they challenge or contradict it in the meanings stated, or they are simply autonomous” (Codoban, 2014, p. 14). Paraverbal language is a vocal form of nonverbal language. It is represented by intonation, rhythm, accents, speed, clarity, volume and is related to oral expression (Cioara, 2014). The voice gives us a lot of information about the speaker’s physical or mental state. For example, we can find out information about age, we can tell if the person is calm or nervous, in a hurry or patient. Paraverbal language is also considered a component of emotional intelligence, being a powerful tool for influencing the people we interact with (Cioara, 2014).

Research in the field of communication science has highlighted the importance of non-verbal language, both personally and professionally. The unanimous opinion is that, in an act of communication, at least quantitatively, nonverbal messages predominate (some authors advance 65%, others go up to 93%) (Kunczick & Zipfel, 1998). Once we become aware that our image is mainly constructed through nonverbal means, and then, that these means are among the most diverse ones and often subtle, we will assume the two imperatives coming off immediately: that of carefully supervising our whole behavior in order to control to a large extent the messages we send, which, in short, will constitute our image in the eyes of others; and that of being as attentive as possible to the nonverbal messages emitted by those around us, in order to know them, only thus, in an authentic way (Radu, 2013).

Practically, when we say that someone is insightful or intuitive, we are actually referring to their ability to read other people’s nonverbal cues and to compare them to verbal ones. In other words, when we say we “feel” that someone lied to us, we actually notice that the language of his body and the words spoken by that person are not in agreement. Women are generally more insightful than men, and this justifies what we usually call “female intuition”. Women have the innate ability to collect and decipher nonverbal cues and to look carefully at the small details. This intuition becomes especially evident in the women who have raised children, in the first years, the mother realizes the communication with the child especially in the non-verbal way; this is the reason why women are more insightful negotiators than men (Pease, 1984, p. 10).

#### **4. Appreciative language**

Appreciative communication is meaningful to the members of an organization, regardless of what level is used, either between manager and employees, or between employees, because anyone can make a difference in the workplace, whatever their position in the organization (Chapman & White, 2012). Feeling appreciated in the workplace is especially important because each one of us wants to know that what we do matters, and “besides the physical survival, the greatest need for a human being is the psychological survival: to be understood, to be able to affirm, to be confirmed and appreciated” (Covey, 1989, p. 241). Without the feeling of being valued by the manager and colleagues, employees begin to feel like a robot or a commodity and thereby their motivation tends to decrease over time (Chapman & White, 2012).

Using appreciative language in work relationships, either as a manager or as an employee seems simple, but it is not always. Some authors (Chapman & White, 2012) have distinguished

between recognition and appreciation. While recognition has an effect on the performance of employees, focusing on what is best for the organization and its development, appreciation focuses on both performance and the value of each employee, being a symbiosis between what is good for the organization and at the same time for its employee. This approach could lead to supporting a member of organization to find a position, a function that is better for him, but also even better for it, the benefits coming from both directions (Chapman & White, 2012).

The expression of appreciation in the workplace can be done by several methods surprised by Chapman & White (2012). By our nature, we all tend to speak our own language of appreciation. A person feels appreciated when someone comes to their aid in an activity and thus that person will in turn be a helping person. Another individual feels appreciated when the manager makes time to have a discussion with him in which to express ideas or how the activity in which he is engaged is progressing, so that this individual will also engage in conversations with his colleagues, asking about their well-being. Another employee feels appreciated at the workplace when affirmative-positive words are addressed and so we can expect from him to say affirmative-positive words to those he works with. Another feels appreciated when he receives various gifts, so that he also will express his appreciation to other members of the organization offering gifts. In another case, a person feels appreciated when he or she receives a beating on the shoulder or a high-five, so that in this way he will also express his appreciation, through physical contacts with his other colleagues (Chapman & White, 2012).

It is therefore the duty of the manager to analyze the language of appreciation most appropriate in each situation, for each individual employee, if he wants them to be efficient and well understood. On the contrary, an apparently appreciative gesture of the supervisor or leader could be considered at the opposite pole by the one addressed to (Chapman & White, 2012).

### **5. Appreciative leadership concept**

Leadership exists in our daily lives. Getting to know yourself, being yourself and revealing your personality to others are the three vital ingredients that contribute to the effectiveness of leadership (Goffee & Jones, 2010). Today's leaders must be partners of their people. Thatchenker & Metzger (2008) stress the importance of transforming employees into partners, in this sense one of the basic principles of appreciative management, applied both in the education system and in leadership, so we talk about the partnership in education between teachers and student-students, partnership in ensuring social welfare between social worker and client, management partnership between the company administration and employees. It is significant to specify the pro-consumer (pro-client) orientation of the professionals who adopt the appreciative style (Sandu, 2009). They can no longer lead based solely on the power conferred by the position.

Leaders and managers differ in the way they think and, the way they act is very different. If you want to fully appreciate what makes a leader special, then you will need to first understand this way of thinking (Bushe, 1995; 2001). The cornerstone of the leader's way of thinking is the existence of a real desire to lead and to be prepared to translate this commitment into daily facts. It is built on passion, self-confidence and full harmony with human nature. Leaders recognize that they will achieve better results if the team's attitude and approach are right (Espedal, 2008). While

managers see leadership as one of the many functions they must perform in their management role, leaders do not see it as a duty to perform, but as something that defines them. In practice, a leader thinks and therefore acts very differently from a manager, although he may actually have to fulfill similar obligations and tasks in his daily work (Cuyvers, 2010).

Leadership is a skill that everyone can cultivate because, indeed, there is a potential leader within each of us. Whether at work, in the family, in moments of relaxation or social engagement, anyone interacting with other people has the opportunity to showcase their leadership qualities (Andrus, 2010). "A leader with a high level of appreciative intelligence sees the oak hidden in the acorn. But this type of leader goes even further, manages to plant his acorns and persevere, helping them to grow. While others may have doubts about the potential of acorns, these leaders believe in and others' abilities to water and to fertilize the plants from the tall to the tall oak" (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2008, p. 46). They face the risks and uncertainties associated with any new things you plant and hope to grow. Finally, they find the path to follow in order to allow the oak to survive and to steadily grow, despite unforeseen circumstances (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2008).

Appreciative leaders do not limit their ability to discern the positive only by redefining the framework in which they see the various situations or products. For many, "appreciative intelligence manifests itself in their ability to see those around them, along with their talents, in a special light. An appreciative leader will succeed in imposing high standards and expectations. It can create "high quality connections" by saying interactions from which people have the feeling that they are chosen with vitality, positive appreciation and reciprocity. Interactions like this increase people's psychological, social, physiological and energy resources, resources that will them to achieve an increased level of personal competence. The same can be said about their positive beliefs about themselves and their abilities, which thus become self-confirmed prophecies, which make them, enjoy new victories and achievements. In addition to believe that their actions matter, these people have the ability to "enter into potentially stressful situations with confidence and safety, thus resisting the danger of reacting under stress (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2008, pp. 218-219).

## **6. Conclusions and discussions**

Appreciative leaders will certainly contribute to increasing the incidence of innovations and creative solutions at the organizational level. From a tactical point of view, if a leader can recapture reality, appreciate the positive and see how the future unfolds today, then the entire organization will feel the impulse generated by innovation and creativity and for free, it will be able to lead to accomplishment of tasks related to long-term goals. The leader with appreciative intelligence creates a favorable climate for the cultivation of so far undiscovered or untested talents (Cojocaru, 2005; Burr, 2003). Applying the same state of mind that allows creative solutions to emerge, they encourage the emergence of light and the flourishing of talent and excellence. When one assumes that people or groups inherently possess high talent, skills and values, leaders are more likely to remove barriers that inhibit creativity, provide resources to support new ideas, and give people freedom to excel. Such a culture allows taking risks that accompany exploration, opening the gates of innovation.



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