

The Top 5 Lessons from Appreciative Education that Help Me Be a Better Businessperson and Human Being

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Abstract

Having transitioned from working for a higher education institution to working for a construction supply company, I was initially unsure if my remaining coursework for my Higher Education Leadership MEd program would be applicable. However, taking the Appreciative Education graduate-level course this semester has allowed me to be a more effective businessperson and human being. The purpose of this article is to share my personal story of five ways I have applied the Appreciative Education framework to my business life as well as other facets of my life.

Keywords

Appreciative Education, business practices, People Before Process

Eighteen months ago, I transitioned from working as a member of the Florida Atlantic University (FAU) Baseball Coaching Staff to becoming a salesperson for a construction supply company. The only item I still needed to complete from my time at FAU was to finish the last two classes for my master's degree in Higher Education Leadership. This fall, I enrolled in the new Appreciative Education graduate-level class that my advisor, Dr. Jennifer Bloom co-taught with Dr. Amanda Propst Cuevas and Bryan Hursh. To be honest, I was a bit skeptical about the applicability of the class to my current work in the world of business. However, I quickly realized that everything I learned about the Appreciative Education theory-to-practice framework is 100% applicable to both my business and my personal life. The purpose of this article is to share my personal story of five ways I have applied the Appreciative Education framework to all facets of my life. The lessons I have already learned in this class have helped me become a better businessperson and human being and I hope by sharing these lessons that it may inspire others who work outside of education to learn more about the Appreciative Education framework.

Lesson 1: "People Before Process"

The first lesson I have learned is the importance of centering "people before process" (Beorchia, 2021, p. 44). Every relationship and business decision needs to be human-centered. My job involves building relationships with customers, manufacturing representatives, and owners of companies that gross \$1-5 million a year. Appreciative Education has reminded me that for my constituents, the businesses they own are often also their livelihood. Sometimes, these meetings can become intense because of the necessity to be successful in their work. Seeking to first understand where my clients are coming from has allowed me to better understand their needs. I look around their office to gather clues about what is important to them, including their family, hobbies, and interests. People love talking about themselves, their families, and things they care about, which helps me to build trust and helps the people I am working with feel more comfortable.

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Lesson 2: The Power of Questions

The second lesson I have learned from Appreciative Education is the importance of asking high quality, generative questions (Bloom & McClellan, 2016). Asking good Discover phase questions has helped me build trusting relationships with my clients quickly. In Lesson 1 above, I mentioned how I get to know my clients by asking them about their families, hobbies, and interests. However, I have also found that it is important to ask clients questions about their work-related needs. I typically first ask clients about what is going well in their business before asking them about their points of friction and/or frustration in their work. By asking questions about both what is going well and what their needs are, I can better frame how my company's products might help enhance what is going well and/or address a friction point in their business. By first understanding their needs, I am better able to articulate how I can help improve their business and increase their profitability.

Lesson 3: Reframe Problems into Opportunities to Learn

The third lesson I have learned is the importance of reframing problems into opportunities to learn (Jones, 1999). In the construction industry, the problems are usually the focus of each day: either the crew does not show up on time, the material is not at the job site, or some other unexpected issue arises. The strength of the relationship with the contractor determines how these problems are handled and addressed. When I first started my job, I made a pitch to a big contractor that covered the features and benefits of our products in 20-25 minutes. After the presentation, the contractor said he would give me a chance. This order was my largest to date as it involved delivering two full trucks of material, and I quickly completed the paperwork for the order and hit the submit button. Unfortunately, after the materials were shipped, I realized that I had ordered the wrong material. I rushed the entire process, got way too excited, and forgot to check my work, which resulted in my company having to cover the freight and replacement costs. My boss brought me in the next day, knowing that I was beating myself up about the entire situation. He looked at me and simply said, "Bet you won't do that again," and slowly walked away. This huge mistake I made early on in my career taught me a valuable lesson—*always* double check orders before placing them. To this day, I double check and even sometimes triple check each order. My mistake taught me that everyone makes mistakes, but the important thing is how one responds to the mistake and learns from it.

Lesson 4: Practice Gratitude

The fourth lesson I have learned from Appreciative Education is the importance of gratitude. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to play professional baseball for the Toronto Blue Jays organization. During that time, I remember my gratitude for being surrounded by amazing people playing the game that I loved so much. However, when my baseball career ended, I lost my purpose and self-confidence. Learning about the Appreciative Mindset (Bloom et al., 2008) has reminded me to write down things I am thankful for every morning after I get out of bed. My list of blessings includes my health, my fiancé, my family, my dog, the opportunity to earn a master's degree, and the fact that I was able to pursue my baseball dreams. Writing down the list of things I am grateful for allows me to reset my mind and reduce my stress levels, especially when it wants to focus on my to-do list for the day. A welcome addition to writing my gratitude list habit has been going to the gym every morning. I make it my goal to do something for my mind when I wake up, my body when I work out, and for my heart when I live out my life with gratitude and thankfulness. I find that starting my day this way has also helped me be more appreciative of the little things throughout the day, including the quiet, peaceful morning walks with my dog,

my relationships with my friends, and the opportunity to work for a great company. I am so lucky to live the life I do, and I need to be able to share that and hopefully be a light to the people with whom I interact daily.

Lesson 5: Focus on Achieving Small Goals

The fifth lesson I have learned from the Appreciative Education framework is to focus on achieving small goals daily. Although I have long-term (e.g., six- and twelve-month) goals written down, I find that writing down my daily goals leads me to act on my short- and long-term goals. Although I previously struggled with my twelve-month goals appearing too difficult or too far away, setting daily goals has allowed me to make progress one step at a time. The Design phase of Appreciative Education is focused on making concrete, achievable goals and the Deliver phase reminds me to celebrate the small accomplishments I achieve. The Don't Settle phase of Appreciative Education motivates me to push myself to be the best version of myself every day. As I mentioned above, my morning gratitude list and workout routine has not only increased my gratitude, but also by completing both tasks, it gives me a sense of accomplishment typically before the sun even rises. Celebrating the fact that I have accomplished two of my daily goals before breakfast has resulted in me embarking upon the day stronger and more determined to achieve my other goals for the day.

Conclusion

Learning about Appreciative Education has helped me be a better businessperson and human being by allowing me to face my daily challenges with optimism and positivity. Every day is a new adventure, and it can be life changing. One can change peoples' lives by simply having conversations and allowing oneself to truly be an active listener and a true friend. The Appreciative Education framework has taught me: how to center people before process, the power of questions, how to reframe problems into opportunities, the importance of gratitude, and to focus on accomplishing small goals. Although my life story is far from over, these lessons have truly helped me be a better businessperson and human being and will continue to influence my journey ahead.

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