Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn

Developing an Appreciative Learning–Leading Culture at Mosaic Learning Center

This article explores how staff members in a school that serves students with developmental disabilities unleashed their innate desire to lead and learn together by creating an appreciative learning culture. It affirms the power of discovering and celebrating the positive core of individuals and the population they serve. The authors identify how embedding the practice of learning leadership elevates the collective intelligence of the organization and its capacity for relationship, responsiveness, resilience and creativity.

Perhaps it is the spirit of our organization that inspires me the most: the palpable sense of community, compassion and joy that is made visible through the daily interactions of our staff and students. Or perhaps it is the demonstration of learning practices at play each day that captures my sense of wonder. Or maybe it is simply hearing one of our employees share how learning leadership together as an organization has dissolved the information silos of roles and inspired a sense of coherence and wholeness that brings such an overwhelming sense of hope and gratitude.

Miriam Novotny, Executive Director of MLC

This is the story of Mosaic Learning Center (MLC) and how the practice of learning leadership evolved from cultivating an atmosphere of inquiry and appreciation. Founded in Vermont in 2002, MLC began as a consultation service for students with intensive special needs. Today, MLC has a consultation service, two schools and a staff of special educators, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, behaviorists and instructors who pour their hearts and minds into creating meaningful programs for students with developmental disabilities.

Sandra Wells has over 25 years of experience as an educator, facilitator and coach. She is the "coach’s coach", working with high-level professionals on personal and organizational development. Her unique approach encourages clients to make bold commitments and expand their leadership presence and capacity for contribution. Contact: sandrabwells@gmail.com

Miriam Novotny
Miriam is the executive director of the Mosaic Learning Center. She received her Masters’ degree from Case Western Reserve University. Miriam values developing a work environment that engages the strengths of staff, students and community. She seeks to inspire a sense of curiosity and creativity in order to foster the most vibrant and appreciative learning opportunities possible.

Contact: miriam@mosaiclearningcenter.com

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Appreciative Learning culture

Appreciative Inquiry principles posit that human organizations are living systems with the capacity to self-organize, to adapt and to respond continuously to change; that they are like an open book, with stories to tell that are constantly evolving through shared authorship; they also posit that inquiry and change are simultaneous; that a compelling sense of purpose aligns organizational decisions and learning; and that a collective vision of future possibilities informs fruitful actions in the present.

Frank Barrett wrote that “Appreciative Learning cultures nurture innovative thinking by fostering an affirmative focus, expansive thinking, a generative sense of meaning, and creating collaborative systems.” (Barrett, 1995).

MLC discovered their affirmative focus by co-constructing core values, purpose and vision at their first Appreciative Inquiry Summit in 2014. Informed by the essence of their positive core, they use inquiry and an appreciative lens to build relationships and broaden their capacity for innovation and joy as they serve students, families and their community.

This is a practice of thinking and a practice of being and I am so thankful to be able to do it with my co-workers.

Staff member, MLC

Celebrating the positive core of MLC through a consistent rhythm of gatherings for annual summits, quarterly in-services and monthly meetings infuses the culture with opportunities for personal and professional growth. Engaging in a continuous practice of inquiry, appreciation and learning with co-workers...
contributes to a sense of belonging and the dissolution of silos. This investment of time and energy is creating a story-rich culture at MLC and has inspired the development of a unique perspective within the field of special education.

Working at Mosaic Learning Center has helped me recognize the positive in everything. At Mosaic, we really pay attention to the strengths of all of our students. And I think, for a while in my life, I was very focused on the negative – always looking at the deficits and the downfalls. I appreciate this positive focus because it has helped me recognize the positive and the beauty in each moment.

Staff member, MLC

A responsive, living system

The Mosaic Framework seeks to discover the positive core within each student. By doing so, it broadens the scope of possibilities to address areas where a student is challenged. It blends leadership skills, clinical wisdom and an appreciative, strengths-based focus to maximize student potential and transform their educational experience. The Mosaic Framework contextualizes education as a responsive, living system, capable of adapting.

Within that living system, teachers-as-leaders go beyond the role of imparting knowledge and skills to embody learning, relying on the collective intelligence and wisdom within the system. Special educators, clinicians, behaviorists and instructors collaborate to support exceptional outcomes for their students.

Yesterday was my first day of work at Mosaic Learning Center and I have never been surrounded by a group of individuals who are so passionate and so positive. I’ve been working in special education for four years now and I’m the person who wants to try so many new things. Yesterday when I left work, I thought, wow – there are more people out there like me! I’m so grateful to be surrounded by so many people who have the same end goal and who are passionate about the work they are doing.

Staff member, MLC

In an appreciative learning culture, a common language emerges. The collective focus shifts from identifying problems to seeing possibilities. Inquiry is generative and “how might we” becomes a guiding question embedded in the culture. Learning to learn in community is a very personal journey and, at the same time, a collective adventure.

Appreciation fuels and nourishes imagination. Appreciation changes the rhythm and coherence of the human heart. Appreciating opens awareness and goes
In an appreciative learning organization, there are no constraints on the ability of the system to be responsive, to self-organize and to harvest the intelligence of the whole.

hand in hand with curiosity and wonder. When we focus on what’s right with our world, when we look for evidence of the good, when we anticipate what is positive, life affirming and possible, we leave behind the idea of learning by correction and criticism and embrace the ideas of learning by elevating and celebrating.

At the end of the day at previous jobs, I’ve felt like I had to work off negative energy – like I’d go home and run as fast as I could, just to release those negative toxins from my body. I don’t ever have that feeling at Mosaic Learning Center. Now when I go for a run or walk, it’s for pleasure and enjoyment.
Staff member, MLC

Leading at all levels

If the organization can stay in a continuous conversation about who it is and who it is becoming, then leaders don’t have to undertake the impossible task of trying to hold it all together.
Wheatley, 2017

Uncertainty, ambiguity and change challenge organizations to adapt, innovate and create. When leadership is defined by title or role, there is an inherent delineation between those who have the ability to influence the system and those who do not. In an appreciative learning organization, there are no constraints on the ability of the system to be responsive, to self-organize and to harvest the intelligence of the whole.
As MLC began to claim its positive core, the coherence within the system contributed to the emergence of and desire for leadership at all levels.

Early in 2016, two MLC staff members expressed interest in learning to lead and asked if MLC would provide leadership training. One stated, “I’m hoping to walk away with the knowledge and ability to be both assertive and sincere when responding to situations that are challenging or uncomfortable. I want to be able to speak in the moment regarding the situation without becoming frustrated. I want to have the confidence to give feedback constructively and coach sympathetically.”

MLC’s decision to honor this request led to the creation of Skillful Leading, Learning and Living, a year-long learning experience designed by Sandra Wells. A small group embarked on this journey together. A year later, they requested that MLC offer the program again and include all staff members in the experience.

This whole process has been quite eye-opening and inspiring ... I am hoping that the second time around will make it more like second nature. I am definitely taking the ideas of skillful leadership outside of work as well – I am so grateful for that...it’s been really special.
Staff member, MLC

Skillful leading, learning and living

The image that the word “leadership” conjures for many of us – a single person who sits at the top of an organization, makes decisions alone,
Skillful Leading, Learning and Living is ... a practice of continuous revelation. Discovery takes place in moments of challenge and vulnerability where all of what life brings becomes a practice ground.

has all the answers and proclaims what’s next – that kind of leadership creates dependency, entitlement and passivity. What we’re talking about at MLC is a distributive form of leading where you recognize that you are interdependent. The intention is that you become more yourself. Standing in your authenticity is the most skillful way to face uncertainty – knowing yourself deeply and being able to count on yourself under all circumstances – being a community of support and practice where your care and compassion for one another is experienced and expressed.

Sandra Wells

Skillful Leading, Learning and Living is a high-touch organizational learning experience. Each month, participants receive a written module, an audio recording and a video conference coaching call. Each participant is paired with a learning partner for a period of three months. Learning partners choose how and when to engage with one another and change throughout the year. Every month there is a facilitated conversation with the whole group on the current module. Now, in the second year of the program, staff members who participated in the initial program are becoming group facilitators. This structure ensures that participants are connecting with the material at least once a week. The modules explore practices of awareness, inquiry, listening, communication, integrity, accountability, presence, resilience, feedback, agreements, candor and appreciation.

Research shows that the single biggest cause of work burnout is not work overload, but working too long without experiencing your own personal development.

Kegan and Lahey, 2016

When personal development happens outside an organizational setting, the organization itself does not develop or change. And, more often than not, employees who have attended offsite development programs find it hard to sustain their learning when they return. By deliberately structuring experiences of whole-system and personal development within an organization, employees share the excitement and energy of stepping out of their comfort zone together.

I have experienced clarity in finding my voice and understanding how people relate and communicate. I’ve had some amazing “aha” moments at work and in my personal life – it is just a continual practice. This has been a game changer and I cannot imagine it not being in my life.

Staff member, MLC

As individuals within an organization inquire and learn together, questions become more interesting than answers, and relationships develop the tensile strength that emerges with shared vulnerability. Problems are contextualized
as opportunities to learn more about one another and more about the impact of actions and decisions. When organizations embody skillful leading and appreciative learning, they foster deep caring about one another and create an atmosphere where feedback, support and shared practices are valued.

The coaching for skillful leadership experience is really an exploration of self. You can’t lead if you aren’t in touch with who you are in a profound way and you can’t lead if you aren’t in touch with people you’re working with – having a meaningful connection on two levels – the head and the heart.
Staff member, MLC

Skillful Leading, Learning and Living is not about how to develop the traits of a good leader. The modules focus on developing the inner conditions that support effective action and the authentic expression of self. Participants identify reactive patterns and explore ways of moving gracefully from reactivity to creativity.

I thought skillful leading would be something that I could put in my bag of tools and tricks to be a better leader ... sort of a to-do and manifesto. I quickly realized with the first module that was not the case. There was no to-do. I was shocked at how deep of a dive it is into yourself. Because it is not about bringing hierarchical skills to the table. It’s this amazing gift ... to really take a minute to explore who you are, how you think, how you relate to other people, how you relate to your job and how it relates to your life, how your life relates to your people and to yourself... it’s just all of it.
Staff member, MLC

In essence

This work that we’ve done – this energy – it is palpable ... Taking this energy with us changes the dynamic of the relationships, of the meetings. Things can be headed in one direction and we use our skills to change the trajectory – individually, as an organization and in the community we serve.
Staff member, MLC

This year-long journey of discovery is designed to affirm the authentic expression of each individual’s unique gifts. Learning to learn together creates a deep sense of belonging where differences can coexist and contribute to creative solutions.

True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are, it requires you to be who you are.
Brown, 2017
Skillful Leading, Learning and Living is not a methodology. It is a practice of continuous revelation – of making the unknown known and simultaneously being willing to not know, to delight in complexity and ambiguity. Discovery takes place in moments of challenge and vulnerability where all of what life brings becomes a practice ground.

Although the journey into learning leading began with step into the unknown, it was a very purposeful step: one that was grounded in intention, initiated in trust and energized through curiosity. With every new cycle of learning, staff members become stewards of leadership with the opportunity to transform the organization’s shared experience. Through on-going practice, MLC has become a beacon of positive energy, contributing daily to their students, families of their students and their community at large.

REFERENCES


