

## DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

How does one continue to develop oneself as a leader? Since I began a doctoral program in Leadership and Policy Studies last summer, this question has been one focus of inquiry. Here are ways I enhance my own leadership development.

As much as one can learn from experiencing leadership challenges at work and reading about leadership, nothing replaces an intentional practice of seeking insight about oneself. In his book, *Leadership Development, Paths to Self-Insight and Professional Growth*, Manuel London echoes my sense that we nourish leadership growth by

- Intentionally gathering and refining our ability to use feedback
- Following a reflective practice, such as journaling
- Observing and trying out leadership behaviors by working with guides, such as role models, mentors, and coaches.

**Gathering feedback.** We all get frequent feedback that does not necessarily help us grow. Especially when feedback—both positive and critical—is unsolicited, we may disregard what does not square with our self-concept. For this reason, I have found that I need to conduct interviews about my own leadership.

For recent interviews, I chose an appreciative inquiry approach. Briefly, as I wrote some years ago in this column (*Ideas for Leaders* <http://www.revisions.org>. Volume 1 # 5), appreciative inquiry seeks to understand strengths, passions, and lift-giving forces in order to use them more often and more mindfully. See the leadership interview questions in the right hand column.

My appreciative inquiry interviews centered on identifying leader qualities that will help me as the chair of a non-profit corporation board. Four interviews revealed patterns that heightened my awareness of using strengths in knowledge, skills and attitudes. New information, such as learning that others think I am skillful in navigating politically sensitive organizational issues, helps me approach such issues with confidence.

**A reflective practice.** Following a regular reflective practice also fosters insight. I started a daily leadership journal. Begun as an experiment, this twenty minute writing time invites more thorough, less reactive reflections on consulting projects, and encourages integration of my professional development reading. Other forms of reflective practice among colleagues and clients include running alone in the morning before work, meditating, and writing poetry.

**Choosing and using guides.** In order to continue to develop as leaders, we need intentional guides. Watching and conversing with these leadership guides helps us prepare for and try out new leadership roles. At any given time, I usually have two or three organizational leaders I follow, often by serving on volunteer boards. My multiple mentors also include colleagues and role models in professional organizations.

May your ongoing learning be rich and rewarding.

## Leadership Questions

Appreciative inquiry interview questions follow a pattern: describe peak experiences; identify themes; paint a picture of ideal possibility. For example, ask:

- Describe peak experiences about my leadership
- For each experience, what attributes—knowledge, skills and/or attitudes—did you see?
- Based on these attributes and the organization's future needs, imagine my leadership three years from now.

Use such questions in performance appraisal processes, both for yourself and for leaders you are guiding. For 360 degree ("all the way around") feedback, ask the questions of colleagues, direct reports and those above you (e.g., your board).

## Saw Sharpening

My University of VT doctorate focuses on:

- Organizational development
- Leadership
- Institutional change
- Performance management
- Policy development
- Research