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An Appreciative Approach to Goal-Setting for Academic Employees

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When asked what he looks for when hiring employees, Dr. Paul Orehovec, Vice President of Enrollment Management at University of Miami responds, “Somebody who wants my job” (personal communication, September 25, 2010). He further explains that the heavy demands of higher education administrative positions require people who are self-motivated and driven. These professionals need mentoring relationships to help them establish appropriate career and professional goals. Mentors often have valuable knowledge to share with their mentees on these topics, but do not always know how to effectively share their expertise.

Mentoring relationships occur in a number of settings in academia, but there are few frameworks to guide the establishment of these mentoring relationships. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the six phases of the Appreciative Advising model (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008) can be adapted to help higher education administrators mentor and nurture the careers of future administrative leaders. The Appreciative Advising model is being utilized on a number of college campuses to help students identify their dreams for their future and devise a plan to make those dreams come true (Bloom et al., 2009). This article proposes adapting this model to be used with academic staff to help them achieve their career and personal goals.

Appreciative Advising Overview

Based on the organizational development theory of Appreciative Inquiry, Appreciative Advising applies the theory to the advisor-student relationship, giving advisors a way to further develop their students by helping them realize, plan, and achieve their goals (Bloom & Martin, 2002). There are six phases of Appreciative Advising (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008):

- The **Disarm** phase involves making a positive first impression with students and allaying any fear or suspicion they might have of meeting with the advisor.
- The **Discover** phase is spent continuing to build rapport with students and learning about the students’ strengths, skills, and abilities.
- The **Dream** phase involves uncovering students’ hopes and dreams for their futures.
- Once we know their dreams, then the **Design** phase is spent co-creating a plan to make their hopes and dreams come true.
- The **Deliver** phase is the implementation phase where students carry out their plan and the advisor’s role is to support them as they encounter roadblocks.
- The final phase, **Don’t Settle**, involves challenging the students to achieve their full potential. (Bloom, 2009, n.p.)

The Appreciative Advising framework is being utilized at institutions across the country to enhance

adviser interactions, teach student success courses, and to assist students in academic jeopardy (Bloom et al., 2009). These institutions vary in size and institution type. For example, the University of South Carolina's Academic Centers for Excellence (ACE) uses Appreciative Advising as the guiding framework for the work that academic coaches do with students who are on academic or financial aid probation. ACE's academic coaches use an Academic Plan that is based on the six phases of Appreciative Advising to help students outline a plan for collegiate success.

Another institution that is utilizing the Appreciative Advising framework is the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). One way that the framework is being utilized is through advising nursing students that have not met academic requirements for continuing enrollment in the program at UNCG. Advisors in the Student Academic Services office use these techniques to help these students "explore their options and stay enrolled at UNCG" (Bloom et al., 2009) By staying enrolled, these students were able to choose new majors, and in doing so, more than 30 percent of students showed a dramatic improvement in their grade point average (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Using these advising techniques, students were able to create new pathways that led to successes they would not have experienced in their current major.

Applying Appreciative Advising to Academic Mentoring Relationships

With minor adaptation, the Appreciative Advising model is ideal to foster and enhance the mentor/mentee relationships that occur in higher education. Due to the fact that mentors often "advise" their mentees, this model can be used as a framework to help adult employees set goals. To illuminate how this framework can be utilized in a professional academic relationship, Dr. Dennis George, Dean of University College at Western Kentucky University (WKU) (Personal communication, September 25, 2010) was interviewed. He is a mentor to many of his employees and young WKU faculty members. He provided insights and suggestions on how mentors can take an appreciative approach to their mentoring relationships.

Disarm

This phase is a vital in terms of establishing an open and trusting relationship that will be necessary to do the reflection and vision-setting work that occurs in later phases. There are many opportunities to build relationships with employees: day-to-day interactions, taskforces and committee involvement, weekly meetings, quarterly evaluations, or even during *ad hoc* encounters. While frequent interaction can help build rapport, mentors should not discount the importance of occasional one-on-one meetings. "Just taking young faculty to lunch can make a huge impact on how they think about senior administrators," says Dr. George. "...A friendly conversation over lunch lets them know you are genuine and open. This can be a great first step in gaining trust and building the foundation for a lasting relationship" (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010).

A specific example of how to initiate this phase comes directly from Dean George's experiences at goal-setting lunches with employees. He relies on the casual atmosphere of a restaurant or coffee shop to put the faculty member at ease. Other strategies to help disarm employees include creating an open-door policy, giving office guests individualized attention by reducing distractions, such as silencing phones, fully closing the door, and turning off computer monitors and speakers. This will help guests know that they have the mentor's full attention and that the mentee is cared about.

Discover

After initial rapport has been established in the Disarm phase, the Discover phase allows mentors to learn about the mentee's strengths, weaknesses, and skills (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Positive open-ended questions can be utilized to learn more about the mentee's background and story. Sample questions that can be asked to ascertain this information include: "Describe a time that you have felt the most alive and engaged in your work" or "Tell me about a time that you felt that you positively impacted someone else's life." As a supervisor and/or mentor, the mentor can share their own observations of the mentee's successes.

Dr. George agrees that this phase is a necessity:

Often, ...newly-tenured faculty have spent six years or so focused on doing those things that they felt were necessary for tenure that they never stopped to think about whether or not it was enjoyable or exciting or if they could see themselves doing it for a 30-year career. Facilitating this discovery process...can open up totally new horizons as they enter the next phase of their professional life. (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010)

Discover is still an opportunity to build rapport, where mentors can also share some of their own experiences so that the mentee can see that there are parallels in their stories. While it is important for both mentor and mentee to disclose information, the focus of the conversation should remain on the mentee.

Dream

After rapport has been established and the mentor has some insight into the mentee's stories, the Dream phase is a chance to learn what the mentee's hopes are for their future (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Visions can be specific to the current field or can expand to include new departments and jobs outside of academia. Dreaming about "what can be" is an exercise, for the mentor, in listening.

According to Dr. George:

Once a person sets aside the constraints that they feel and faces their career from the perspective that they are in control, it's amazing what they find out about themselves...they may find themselves dreaming about a completely different trajectory. Some young faculty may actually find that they want to be administrators! (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010)

If the mentoring relationship is a dual relationship of supervisor/subordinate, it is then important for the mentor not to be offended if the goal of the mentee is outside the current department or division, or if the goal of the mentee is the position the mentor currently holds. Questions that can start the mentor's dreaming could be: "If money were no option, what career would you choose?" or "What legacy do you want to leave behind?" The purpose of the Dream phase is to let the individual brainstorm possible goals without repercussions; the Dream phase puts no limits on capabilities.

Design

During this phase, the dream takes shape as an achievable reality. As Dr. George has observed in his experiences, "This phase can be truly energizing for both mentor and mentee. As the co-creation

process of vision evolves, a tremendous synergy can occur as you collectively work on a professional development strategy for the individual” (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010).

To foster synergy, mentors should use the information learned in the Dream phase as a starting point for creating realistic goals that will lead to the accomplishment of the dream. This phase stresses the importance of co-creating a plan with the mentee by encouraging the mentee to share what they think they will need to do in order to accomplish their dream. Supervisors can feel free to use their experiences as suggestions, their connections to find answers, and their influence to create opportunities. Specifically finding ways that the mentor can participate in the mentee’s vision is a powerful way to for the mentor to show support of the mentee’s goals.

Dr. George stresses:

If their goals are consistent with that of your department or college, you may even find tangible opportunities to give them desired experiences within your own unit. But, you must remember that the purpose of this process is to help them develop professionally, not to take advantage of them or impose your agenda on them. (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010)

Mentors who supervise administrative assistants or office coordinators can help their mentees by conducting mock interviews for employees that are currently engaged in a job search for a new position or by sending mentees to professional development seminars and conferences that would be beneficial for both the office and the assistant/coordinator mentee. As someone who is determined to help their employee/mentee succeed, the supervisor/mentor should make sure the employee ‘owns’ the plan for accomplishing their dreams, and that it is congruent with what the employee wants for themselves, not what the supervisor thinks is best.

Deliver

The Deliver phase involves the mentee going out to execute the plan that has been co-created with the mentor. However, that does not mean the role of a mentor is finished. The important role of the mentor in this phase is to watch, support, and encourage the mentee.

The worst thing you can do for the mentee is to disappear after the plan is developed. If you do, it may wind up only a dream and never a reality... The greater the position you are in to help people achieve their full potential, the greater the responsibility you have in doing so. (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010)

Suggestions for how the mentor can be active during the Deliver phase can include e-mails, phone calls, or occasional accountability meetings to check on the mentee’s progress. If the mentor previously agreed help out the mentee, such as making phone calls or contacts for the mentee, the mentor needs to follow through on those commitments. But according to Dr. George, the most important thing a mentor can do is “Don’t disappear” (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010). Staying in active contact with the mentee, referring to the established goals in daily interactions, being punctual and intentional in answering phone calls or e-mails from the mentee, or providing on-going encouragement when the mentee has a setback are all suggestions for ways to stay active and not “disappear” (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010).

Don’t Settle

“Challenging individuals to reach their full potential” (Bloom, 2009, para. 6) is not a process that is quickly achieved, although milestones and achievement of goals should be acknowledged and celebrated. After goals set by the mentee have been reached, the mentor can positively acknowledge the accomplishment by sending a congratulatory card, call, or email. But Dr. George reminds: “This is not a one-time event. It is a process...on-going encouragement and support is crucial” (D. George, personal communication, September 25, 2010). He emphasizes the importance of setting new goals that create stepping stones toward the established vision. The Don’t Settle phase can also involve mentors encouraging their mentees to reach for higher goals.

Conclusion

The Appreciative Advising model has been shown effective in the area of goal setting and vision development with students (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). This article demonstrates how the Appreciative Advising model could be modified by mentors in academic settings to help optimize their relationships with their mentees by giving specific examples of how the six phases of Appreciative Advising can be adapted to help mentees identify their strengths, verbalize their dreams, and create a plan for fulfilling their dreams and goals. The examples and insights offered by Dr. George provide a professional point of view on the implementation. With minor adaptation, the Appreciative Advising model is a flexible framework for fostering mentoring relationships that occur in higher education.

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