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Adaptable Leadership

A Strengths-based Approach to
Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices

Wendy Campbell
Anne Radford

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Inside this issue

Welcome to February 2014 issue of AI Practitioner

In this issue, *Adaptable Leadership: A Strengths-based Approach to Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices*, you will find nine articles exploring the challenges facing adaptable leaders navigating complexity by choosing to look at their challenging situations honestly and appreciatively.

Enrique J. Zaldivar's Feature Choice article "Authenticity and Accountability: Key

to An Appreciative Stance to Adaptable Leadership" combines AI and multicultural competency principles, emphasizing the importance of discovering our unique cultural lens for effective leadership.

Research Notes presents a review of an earlier AI Practitioner issue, *Appreciative Inquiry in Asia*. We hope it will inspire many to read the August 2013 issue anew or offer their own review of previous issues.

Newly published resources as well as the classics on leadership have been brought together in AI Resources by the new editorial team.

All good wishes as we start a new subscription year!

Anne Radford
Editor, AI Practitioner

4 Issue Introduction

Adaptable leaders let go what no longer serves and encourage what is good

Guest Editors: Wendy Campbell and Anne Radford



25 A Surgeon's Skills Become Business Skills

A Continuing Journey into Adaptable Leadership

Paul R. G. Cunningham and Bruce Flye



37 Culture Change and Strategic Conversations

Adaptive Leadership in Action

Ilene Wasserman and Linda Drexinger Durishin



9 Feature Choice

Authenticity and Accountability: Key to an Appreciative Stance to Adaptable Leadership

Enrique Zaldivar



29 Leading Through Turbulence

Discovering the company's heart-beat and developing organisational resilience

David Gilmour and Rachel Retford



42 The Diary of an Adaptive Change Agent

The Working Reality of Adaptive Leadership

Terri McNerney



20 Positive Adaptive Leadership and Key Principles of Practice in a Time of Uncertainty

Sarah Lewis



33 Adaptable Leadership in the Public Sector

Courage to Take the Strengths-based Approach for Key Outcomes

Steve Loraine



47 Discovering Our Core Values

Leadership as Spiritual Fulfillment

Alfred Leung





Adaptable Leadership

A Strengths-based Approach to Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices

Inside this issue

50 Hope, Despair and Forgiveness: The Foundation of Leadership Resilience

A Conversation in Two Voices

Joan McArthur-Blair and
Jeanie Cockell



54 Leadership 4.0: From Ego-system to Eco-system

Framing a New Form of Adaptive Leadership as an Individual and Co-creative Process

Sally Paulin



59 Appreciative Inquiry Research Notes

A reader's review of the August 2013 AIP issue, *Appreciative Inquiry in Asia*

Neena Verma



63 Appreciative Inquiry Resources

Resources for practitioners wishing to explore further the idea of adaptable leadership

Matthew R. Moehle, Roopa Nandi
and Hardik Shah



68 About the May 2014 Issue

How colleges and universities around the world are using AI

Lane A. Glenn, Kelly Saretsky and
Nancy E. Stetson



69 About the sponsor of this issue

Corporation for Positive Change is a global consultancy that delivers systemic results by applying and advancing Appreciative Inquiry principles and practices.



70 Advertisement

Emerald Books - Leadership and Cultural Webs in Organisations
Appreciating People - A Taste of Appreciative Inquiry, An affordable 12-card pack
Dechen Choling - Mindful Leadership Development Retreat
Topics in AI Practitioner 2014

72 IAPG Contacts and AI Practitioner Subscription Information



Enrique J. Zaldivar

Partner of Inspired-Inc., a global leadership and OD consulting firm, and adjunct professor of OD at American University (Washington, DC) he has added value to thousands of leaders in over 40 countries, emphasizing multicultural competency, and the creative tension between authenticity and accountability.

Contact: ejz@inspired-inc.com
www.inspired-inc.com



Feature Choice

by Enrique J. Zaldivar

Authenticity and Accountability

Key to an Appreciative Stance to Adaptable Leadership

Considering that the topic of the current issue is 'Adaptable Leadership: A Strengths-based Approach to Challenging Environments and Difficult Choices', Zaldivar presents a strengths-based approach to enhance leaders' ability to perform effectively in challenging environments. He combines the principles of Appreciative Inquiry with those of multicultural competency, emphasizing the creative tension amongst authenticity, accountability and adaptability, to the service of more effective leadership.

What questions do we need to ask of ourselves and others to stimulate the generative conversations which will lead us towards uncovering what could be in the realm of becoming effective at operating inclusively and productively in today's extremely challenging and globally diverse world?

The frameworks presented here evolved from knowledge developed in the fields of: cross-cultural or inter-cultural communication, diversity, social constructionism, organization development and Appreciative Inquiry. ("I am stepping on the shoulders of giants" as Sir Isaac Newton so accurately stated centuries ago.) As societies and organizations around the world are facing increasing diversity, the need for lessons from multiple disciplines is becoming increasingly universal. This is because the word diversity is no longer code to define the particular challenges minorities face. Today, in addition to the traditional sources of diversity, such as gender, race, nationality and religion, we now understand a wider construct of diversity, which adds generation/age, level of education, intellectual, emotional and physical ability, field of expertise, hierarchical level, opinion about social issues, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation and behaviour and social class.

Given this challenging global environment, we, as leaders, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) practitioners and agents of change, need to remain ahead of our clients in our own ability to perform effectively in such an environment. And we must be capable of supporting, in our role as consultants and coaches, the growth of our clients as adaptable leaders, as they are increasingly exposed to wider forms of diversity. If not, perfectly well-meaning and appreciative individuals are at risk of unwillingly bringing cross-cultural prejudice into their inquiry and subsequent behaviours.

Key elements to effectiveness in a challenging environment: authenticity, accountability and adaptability.

This article makes a case for holding an appreciative stance in our daily interactions; explores cultural context as a means of increasing our distinctions about, and understanding and appreciation of, the value of cultural differences; introduces the powerful concept that each one of us experiences the world through the filter of our own unique cultural lens (UCL) including how discovering our own UCL strengthens our ability to be effective and adaptable leaders; and identifies and explores the creative tension among key elements to effectiveness in a challenging environment, namely: authenticity, accountability and adaptability.

An appreciative stance

According to Gervase Bushe (2013), “Appreciative Inquiry is a method for studying and changing social systems (groups, organizations, communities) that advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus, does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur.”

Holding an appreciative stance goes beyond, and is independent of, whether or not we are explicitly applying any AI model. Holding an appreciative stance requires us to go to the philosophical roots of AI; it means embodying them into a regular way of being. According to David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney (2001) the five principles of AI are: constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory and positive. Table 1 highlights these principles and challenges us to consider what they mean as we develop our ability to hold an appreciative stance in challenging multicultural environments: in today’s globalized world, most environments have become multicultural.

Table 1: AI principles and holding an appreciative stance

The five principles of AI	Holding an appreciative stance
<p>1. <i>Constructionist principle</i> What we believe to be real in the world is created through our social discourse. We create reality with our words. And inquiry enables us to recall stories and images that stimulate new possibilities for action.</p>	<p>Holding a constructionist, appreciative stance means not forgetting that we create reality with our words and even with the images in our mind. How does this look when in the presence of a culture that values different assumptions than our own?</p>
<p>2. <i>Poetic principle</i> Appreciating context and valuing storytelling enables the collective expression of organizational life in a holistic way. The questions chosen for inquiry, carefully designed to inspire the best in people, have a powerful impact by invoking feelings, thoughts, facts and potentially deep meaning.</p>	<p>In this regard, an appreciative stance means practising the poetic principle in our daily lives: choosing our questions carefully, listening well with genuine curiosity and positive intention, inspiring those around us towards their own best. How do we remain open to stories that provoke us when working in a culture with different values from our own?</p>

Holding an appreciative stance goes beyond, and is independent of, whether or not we are explicitly applying any AI model.

The five principles of AI	Holding an appreciative stance
<p>3. <i>Simultaneity principle</i> This principle proposes that as we inquire into human systems we change them, i.e. inquiry is change and the first question we ask is fateful, since the organisation will turn its energy in the direction of that first question. Questions are never neutral: social systems move in the direction of the questions they most persistently and passionately discuss.</p>	<p>In recent decades, even in the realm of physics, when exploring the smallest constituents, researchers in quantum mechanics began to notice that the act of observing the event actually alters it. So, apparently, inquiring into even the building blocks of matter changes the matter being observed. How can we remain aware of the assumed values behind our questions, or of the way our inquiry may be perceived in a different organizational or societal culture?</p>
<p>4. <i>Anticipatory principle</i> What we do today is guided by our vision, i.e. the picture of that future (anticipatory) reality, which does not yet exist, but which we consider to be better than the current reality, so it motivates us to pursue it. AI skillfully and artfully creates positive imagery on a collective basis to reshape that vision.</p>	<p>Embodying this principle requires us to be constantly mindful that we are always creating all kinds of imagery, whether we are conscious or not of that fact. Do we fall into the trap of assuming our goals are our clients' goals? Do our implicit values and beliefs and our position of privilege, embrace or ignore our clients' values and assumptions?</p>
<p>5. <i>Positive principle</i> A belief that sustainable change requires us to engender positive thinking and social bonding; and that a positive approach is just as valid and contagious as any other. Excitement, inspiration, camaraderie and joy increase creativity, openness to new ideas and people, cognitive flexibility; and promote the strong relationships, particularly between groups in conflict, required for collective inquiry and change</p>	<p>Awareness of our intention tends to be the key for practicing these beliefs. Are we aware of the values behind our assumptions of what is positive? How well do we navigate the boundary between a truly appreciative stance and advocating, indirectly, what we assume to be right?</p>

The essential message for holding an appreciative stance is to go beyond merely understanding and memorizing what AI means, what its principles are and how to apply the 4D or 5D models. Holding an appreciative stance means embodying AI constantly; hopefully everyday and in every interaction we have with a fellow human being. This is especially critical in our currently global world, where conflicts-of-values are common, provocative situations can be unsettling and our assumptions of what is best are constantly in question.

A powerful way to remind ourselves to hold an appreciative stance is to be aware of our unique cultural lens and the cultural context we are operating in.

Our unique cultural lens

A powerful way to remind ourselves to be open, to hold an appreciative stance in the presence of another culture, especially when its values clash fiercely with our own, is to be aware of our unique cultural lens and the cultural context we are operating in. This is about developing a practice of examining assumptions that come from our identity and worldview, from our own cultural filter through which we see the world. It is also about being aware of the set of written and, most importantly, unwritten rules that an individual of a certain culture follows in order to behave in accordance with what is considered to be acceptable behaviour in that culture.

In the mind of any particular individual, some of those rules are conscious (i.e. the individual is aware of them) while the rest are subconscious (i.e. the individual is unaware of their existence). Those subconscious rules most powerfully rule that individual's automatic response mechanisms, and thus affect her/his ability to hold an appreciative stance.

Researchers (e.g. Hofstede (1984; 2010), Trompenaars (1997; 2011), Weaver (2000; 2013)) have developed several frameworks for cross-cultural (or inter-cultural) communication. These can help each person understand her/his unique cultural context. This individualized unique context through which we see the world, the perception and decision-making filter becomes –over our lifetime– our own UCL. These elements of culture offer distinctions that enable us to be more aware of our assumptions, and thus be in a better position to adopt a true appreciative stance.

Discovering our own UCL

One's own self is well hidden from one's own self:

Of all mines of treasure, one's own is the last to be dug up.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The portions of our individual UCL filter that reside in our conscious mind create a conscious influence in the way we see and interact with the world. We are aware of their influence. The rest reside in our subconscious mind. Because we are not even aware of their existence, their influence in our response mechanisms is enormous.

The more we become self-aware, the more we increase the portion of our own UCL residing in our conscious mind, reducing the size of our subconscious/surprising cultural context. The best and most effective way to develop our ability to hold an appreciative stance, even in challenging and/or multicultural environments, lies in deeply exploring, getting to know and becoming really good friends with our own cultural context, with our own UCL. This is because knowing our own UCL increases our awareness of the many ways our own lens is filtering and thus potentially biasing our ability to truly hold an appreciative stance. Unexplored elements of this filter/lens become breeding ground for biases, prejudice, preconceived notions and potential close-mindedness: the antithesis of the appreciative stance.

Unexplored elements become breeding ground for biases, prejudice, preconceived notions and potential close-mindedness: the antithesis of the appreciative stance.

The following exercise can help you explore and strengthen your own UCL.

Table 2: My UCL: A self-reflection exercise

Using the layers listed in the table which follows this one describe, in the luxury of detail, the layers throughout your life of your own unique cultural lens. Then, for your eyes only, distill your descriptions into a one-page synthesis that best captures the essential elements of your UCL, i.e., your own personal filter, through which you see the world and interact with every human being. Then, answer the following questions:

What is the essence of my UCL?
What do I currently perceive as strengths that I can leverage towards my goals?
How can these strengths be best leveraged when working in challenging environments?
What about my UCL could be challenging for me when working multi-culturally? (What data, evidence and experiences do I have (including emotions felt) that suggest sensitive personal areas when my UCL enters other cultures, including other family, group or organizational cultures, even when I am in my own town?)
What do I need to do to be aware of, and self-manage, to remain effective?

The next step is to come up with whatever list of layers of culture best helps you describe and understand yourself and your own unique cultural context; basically, your very own cultural context framework. The layers shown in the following table may be a helpful start.

Table 3: Layers of our own Cultural Context

National (background)/Nationality	Regional/Linguistic
Racial (ancestral)/Ethnic	Generational/Age
Educational: degrees and certifications	Mental (IQ, EQ and other dimension of intelligence) and other physical abilities and disabilities
Organizational: field and hierarchy – the positional levels you have experienced	Social issues – your point of view about each of yesterday’s and today’s relevant social issues
Religious – your life trajectory regarding your religious beliefs and practices	Gender identity and expression
Sexual assignment, orientation and behavior	Social class, and your class progression throughout your life

In order to place this UCL exercise within the larger context it is useful to recall that, almost a century ago, Carl Jung (1929) proposed the existence of two cognitive functions: The perceiving function, through which we become aware, via our senses and our intuition; and the judging function (perhaps more usefully called our decision-making function), through which we decide how to act. Using these

Perceiving, reflecting and deeply knowing who we are at the individual, group and societal levels is a key prerequisite to being authentic.

two functions as columns, start building the Adaptable Leader Development Table, which will lead to a discussion of authenticity, accountability and adaptability and their inherent creative tension.

For leaders, practitioners and any change agents, the power we derive from knowing well our own UCL lies in the ability it gives us to gain access to all the information we have at our disposal, which in turn enhances our capacity to discern and make strategically effective decisions towards creating the conditions within which those we empower can collectively build the desired anticipatory reality.

Being authentic

Perceiving, reflecting and deeply knowing who we are at the individual, group and societal levels is a key prerequisite to being authentic. Likewise, behaving strategically in our relations with self, others and society-at-large is indispensable for being accountable to others regarding the anticipatory reality we have articulated. Finally, as the conditions in which we operate are constantly changing, they inevitably create tensions between being our most authentic selves and behaving with accountability towards the desired anticipatory reality. It is at those moments our on-going efforts to explore and keep updating our own UCL will best endow us with the capacity to remain adaptable, while maintaining a clear line of sight towards the ultimate objective, our articulated and also potentially evolving anticipatory reality.

Table 4: Building the Adaptable Leader Development Table (Step 1)

	Perceive	Act/ behave
At the individual level		
At the group level		
At the societal level		
	AUTHENTICITY	ACCOUNTABILITY

Perceiving and self-witnessing in a mindful way, reflecting on and testing who you are in an appreciative and compassionate way, enables your ability to have access to all the information you have available, which will in turn support your ability to discern at a deeper level. At the individual level, this is called self-awareness; at the collective or group level, social awareness or empathy; and at the societal/cultural level, cultural awareness, i.e. knowing well your own UCL. (See Table 5).

Combined, they enable you to:

1. Recognize your strengths, as well as the strengths of those around you;
2. Accept your limitations, particularly your limitations as a leader or change agent, as well as those of the people who surround you;

The process of acculturation ... largely defines who we are and consequently hugely influences how we act.

3. Recognize and understand the uniqueness of the rich heritage you come from, not only in terms of your ancestors (which is but one layer) but also in each and every one of the different layers of culture, which specifically resonate with you.

The current authentic self

These are the layers which have developed over the period of time you have been living. This process of acculturation has been going on inside each one of us for decades; it largely defines who we are and consequently hugely influences how we act. At their combined core, these layers describe our current authentic self. And the more we explore them the more we can be in a place of appreciation rather than prejudice.

Table 5: Building the Adaptable Leader Development (Step 2)

	Perceive	Act/ behave
At the individual level	Self-awareness	
At the group level	Social awareness or empathy	
At the societal level	Cultural awareness	
	AUTHENTICITY	

Accountability

Very much anchored in the work of influential philosophers such as Giambattista Vico (Lock, 2010) and Martin Heidegger (1929; Dreyfus, 1991), social constructionism has taught us, as Kenneth Gergen so eloquently put it, that “what we believe to be real in the world is created through our social discourse – the conversations we have with each other that lead to agreement about how we will see the world, how we will behave, what we will accept as reality.” (Gergen, 2004). An alternative, yet equally eloquent, way to put it was given by Fernando Flores in 1989, when he wrote “The most important contribution coming from Heidegger’s philosophy is a conceptualization of language and understanding. Language and the spoken word are no longer seen as instruments, but as a revelation; they are phenomena, which cannot be understood as separate from our living in the world, since the world is what becomes revealed through the language.” (Flores, 1989). Bottom line: we create reality with our words and images!

These layers describe our current authentic self. And the more we explore them the more we can be in a place of appreciation rather than prejudice.

This revelation, of course, brings with it a deep level of accountability. Reflecting courageously on the information we learn from paying attention to our somatic reactions, emotions and thoughts enables us to discern the strategic response most likely to further the change we desire towards building our anticipatory reality. At the individual level, we call it self-management; at the collective or group level, relationship management; at the societal level, multicultural competency.

By exploring our own UCL deeply we develop both a strong humility about who we are as well as a genuine curiosity to get to know the other person.

Table 6: Building the Adaptable Leader Development Table (Step 3)

	Perceive	Act/ behave
<i>At the individual level</i>	Self-awareness	Self-management
<i>At the group level</i>	Social awareness or empathy	Relationship management
<i>At the societal level</i>	Cultural awareness	Multicultural competency
	AUTHENTICITY	ACCOUNTABILITY

All combined, they develop our ability to:

1. Celebrate and leverage our strengths, as well as the strengths of those around us and the potentially much increased combined strength of a diverse group of individuals pursuing a common task, i.e. a team;
2. Appreciate our limitations and those of the people who surround us, in an appreciative way that increases the potential power that emanates from supporting each other – someone's limitation, complemented by someone else's strength, no longer becomes one of the team's limitations;
3. Celebrate, appreciate and leverage the uniqueness of the rich heritage which you come from, as well as the uniqueness of the rich heritage which the person(s) in front of you come from.

No UCL is better or worse than the other; they are different. They might be very different if the person grew up in, or has ancestral roots from, a different region, country or continent.

Holding an appreciative stance forces us to explore and be open to more distinctions, more ways of looking at different possibilities, more ways to enrich our deliberations and eventual decision. It also requires us to exercise greater discernment to go beyond mere initial impressions and prejudices, and consider the vast array of information that becomes available to us when we are genuinely curious about exploring the other person's UCL. Without this, well meaning and appreciative individuals are at risk of bringing cross-cultural prejudice into their inquiry and subsequent behaviours.

Learning new cultural contexts

By exploring our own UCL deeply and reflecting on its meaning and potential, we develop both a strong humility about who we are as well as a genuine curiosity to get to know the other person. When we enter a foreign (whether national, regional, organizational, group or familial) culture with humility and curiosity, those expert in that culture tend to welcome our appreciation of its values and essence, and become eager teachers who happily teach us their cultural context, i.e. *the set of written and, most importantly, unwritten rules that an individual of a certain culture follows in order to behave in accordance with what is considered to be acceptable behaviour in such culture*. In other words, they gladly teach us how to become effective and successful at doing business in their culture.

There is tremendous tension between being authentic and being accountable. Adaptable leadership wrestles positively with this tension.

Adaptability

Plans are nothing; planning is everything. Dwight D. Eisenhower

As hinted above, our UCL can be developed. Exploring, understanding, appreciating and leveraging our own UCL, as well as our understanding of the UCL of others, is already huge; and it is also only the beginning of the potential benefit. Inevitably, if we do a thorough and courageous exploration of our own UCL, and reflect on its meaning and potential, we will encounter parts of it we are not proud of, parts of it that make us feel ashamed and even guilty. An equally exciting part of the journey can start if, after identifying one of those, we decide that a particular aspect deserves to be revisited, refined or even potentially discarded. Creating the new story – the vision, the anticipatory reality – that we aspire to meet, and articulating it with clarity of intention, starts the process of making it so. As mentioned in the previous section “we create reality with our words and images.”

Being authentic and being accountable

There is tremendous tension between being authentic and being accountable. Adaptable leadership wrestles positively with this tension; it uses this dynamic tension as energy to propel a combination of:

1. Full, honest authenticity and use of self (Seashore, 1995) to give us as much information as possible about who we are and what we are experiencing in the here and now; with
2. Courageous accountability to act and behave in a way that not only satisfies our need to be authentic in the moment, but also strategically fosters the goals and objectives we have decided we want to accomplish.

As we well know, inquiry is change and the first question we ask is fateful. So, the challenge here becomes: What is the first question we need to ask ourselves in our quest to develop our UCL? It needs to be one that elicits an answer that motivates us enough to do something challenging. It needs to be a question aligned with our higher purpose.

Table 7: The Adaptable Leader Development Table

	Perceive (UCL)	Act/ behave
<i>At the individual level</i>	Self-awareness	Self-management
<i>At the group level</i>	Social awareness or empathy	Relationship management
<i>At the societal level</i>	Cultural awareness	Multicultural competency
ADAPTABILITY	AUTHENTICITY (UCL)	ACCOUNTABILITY

Table 7, which we have been building piece by piece, attempts to provide a quick-reference map for development as an adaptable leader. Its goal is to help us become more effective in our interactions with other human beings, in building relationships, influencing and strategically creating reality with our words – in holding an appreciative stance.

Being fully authentic will always further our true higher purpose. When our objectives are aligned with such purpose our authentic self helps steer us in the right direction.

Conclusion

If we are interested in increasing our ability to be effective and lead courageously in challenging environments where choices are difficult, the first step is to perceive the world in and around us with depth and breadth, while holding an appreciative stance. Exploring our UCL is a powerful addition to any existing self-awareness practice. Finding out who we are when at our most authentic is a prerequisite for growth. It also much reduces the risk of bringing cross-cultural prejudice into our inquiry and subsequent behaviours.

The second step is to act: to use what we have perceived about ourselves, others and society strategically in a way that furthers whatever we have decided is our objective, our vision, our picture of a future anticipatory reality so we are motivated to build it. Peter Drucker (2008) said: "We must seek out opportunities to make ourselves accountable to others." The only way to engender real, sustainable change is by combining genuine and appreciative listening to the stories and objectives of others, sharing our own objectives and expressing them in a clear voice with strong intention, inviting others to support us, creating reality with our words and making ourselves accountable to others.

The more we act, the more we recalibrate

These steps are constantly iterative – the more we act and make ourselves accountable to others, the more we need to perceive, recalibrate and dynamically keep adapting with our eyes firmly planted on the objective. This continues until it becomes necessary to update the objective, our essence (UCL), or both; in other words, until it becomes necessary to grow. What is paramount is to always keep in mind that "the only human being I can change is myself". And, the fascinating fact is that, when I change, others change in the way they behave towards me and, sometimes, towards others. Our own growth can influence, indirectly, the growth of others. Yet, directly, we cannot make anybody else do anything.

Being fully authentic will always further our true higher purpose. When our objectives are aligned with such purpose our authentic self helps steer us in the right direction. Making ourselves accountable to others creates the most powerful intention and motivation to pursue our dreams; it maximizes the chances that we will achieve them. Remaining adaptable in the way we lead our own lives and the teams and organizations we lead is the only way to remain effective in challenging environments. And, in today's multicultural and constantly changing world, virtually all environments look mighty challenging.

Growing old happens by the passage of time; growing up happens by wrestling our own internal demons. Maya Angelou

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Purpose of AI Practitioner

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AI Practitioner Editor/Publisher

The editor-in-chief and publisher is Anne Radford. She is based in London and can be reached at editor@aipractitioner.com

The postal address for the publication is:
303 Bankside Lofts, 65 Hopton Street, London SE1 9JL,
England.
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7633 9630
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Shelagh Aitken is the issue editor for AI Practitioner.
shelagh@editorproofreader.co.uk

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