

# Appreciative Leadership is not about recognition

**In Danish, the word “anerkendelse” (recognition) is used today as a buzzword by leaders describing their leadership approach as well as something employees seek when their work life takes a turn for the worse. However, the problem is that the leadership style of Appreciative Leadership (which in Danish uses the word “anerkendelse” as the translation for “appreciative”) is not about recognition, and therefore, it does not have a human focus the way the title otherwise implies.**

*By Rasmus Thisted Højbæk, work and organizational psychologist*

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What do we expect as employees when we hear that our leader wants to use Appreciative Leadership? Without knowing more than just the title, one would probably be inclined to think that this form of leadership has something to do with recognition. However this is not the case since there is a big difference between the general understanding of the word and what it actually covers in Appreciative Leadership. With employees, this difference establishes false expectations about their situation at work as well as the belief that there will be an increased level of recognition. However, in reality, Appreciative Leadership is just an increased positive focus on the things that work so that the organization can use these things and try to create more of them.

This article provides a critical look at why we should be careful in thinking that Appreciative Leadership leads to recognition for the employee [1].

## **Confusion in the Danish consultancy industry**

In 1986/1987, professor of social science David L. Cooperrider published the method Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in the USA [2]. AI is a method that seeks to investigate what works well in the organization as well as why this is the case, so as to then further develop and transfer the positive elements to other areas in the organization. The first time AI awareness came to Denmark was back in 2001 and 2002, when two books were published on the method [3,4]. These books stay very true and relate directly to the original AI method, and it was introduced to Denmark as the investigative and development method it originally was. In connection with the introduction of AI to the Danish market, there is a small but quite essential snag: the translation of Appreciative Inquiry to Danish. In the first books, we already see disagreement on how the words should be translated. Where the translation of

Inquiry to either Undersøgelse (Investigation) or Samtale (Conversation) has not led to substantial subsequent confusion, the same cannot, however, be said about the translation of Appreciative. The word was translated as Anerkendelse (Recognition) and Værdsættelse (Valuing/Appreciation), where the former has been the one that was adopted by subsequent literature. This is why, today, the word “anerkendelse” is the word used to describe our work involving Anerkendende Ledelse (Appreciative Leadership), Anerkendende Tilgang (Appreciative Approach) and Anerkendende Spørgsmål og Samtale (Appreciative Inquiry and Conversation).

Fifteen years after the introduction of the AI method, “anerkendelse” has now become a buzzword in the Danish consultancy industry, where a good leader is evaluated by how much “anerkendelse” they offer and how much employees feel they receive. With the insufferable wisdom of hindsight, I would say that we should have stuck to the other translation: Værdsættelse. This is because a misunderstanding has occurred between what the name of this type of leadership proclaims combined with the expectations it induces in employees and the actual method and its focus. The appreciation of the AI method is about focusing on resources, opportunities, potential, and the positive elements in the employee in an attempt to further develop these things. Fundamentally, it is about valuing the existing good and well-functioning elements so as to be able to transfer them and later learn from them in other aspects of the organization. This practice is not the same as when people want to be seen and heard for who they are as persons, what they can do, and what they contribute with – which is the more common understanding when using the Danish word “anerkendelse”. The AI method is a survey of the existing competences and positive aspects in the organization, and we therefore should not be led to believe that just because we are using the word “anerkendelse” in the equation, it means that the individuals get more recognition! In the same way as praise is not recognition, a positive focus on what is good is not recognition either.

### **Double up on “anerkendelse”**

In parallel with the dissemination of the AI method in the Danish consultancy industry, Axel Kenneth's Anerkendelsesteori (Recognition Theory) was published in Danish, which now meant that there were two theories in Denmark that used the word “anerkendelse”. These theories, the AI method and Kenneth's Recognition Theory fundamentally have nothing to do with one another: “The two perspectives are totally different and exist independent of one another.” [5]. However, the existence of two different theories using such a well-known and common word has led to confusion since parts of the consultancy industry have not taken a critical approach to differentiate between them. This has become particularly problematic when Kenneth's theory found its way into the Danish literature on the AI method. Furthermore, the confusion is due to the fact that a person with a normal level of

knowledge has a certain understanding of what it means to receive “anerkendelse” (recognition), and so the use of Anerkendende Ledelse for Appreciative Leadership will in itself be misleading.

My claim is therefore that it is a simplification and a mistake to liken and compare the end result of the AI method with the need for recognition that we as people want to have met in social interactions and intimate relationships. Honneth defines recognition as an existentialist need which affects and helps shape our identity, relationship to ourselves, and social competencies [6,7]. Most people may well have an idea of what recognition means and how it affects our lives. Love from your parents and the trust that those closest to you will always support you contribute to fulfilling your need for recognition as a human being. The mutual respect and trust that other people and society as an institution will treat you justly and ethically is recognition of one’s self as an individual, on equal footing with everyone else in society. Together with the recognition from your social circle for your abilities and contributions to the collective, this constitute your existential recognition [8]. People give this recognition to each other in symmetric and equal relationships. However, this makes it difficult to imagine a relationship of mutual recognition between a leader and employee, as the power difference in this situation makes genuine mutual and reciprocal recognition difficult.

### **From method to leadership style**

At the same time as a certain amount of confusion came about concerning what employees can expect from the AI method, a change in the way we use it also took place. From originally being an investigative and development method, today we know AI as Appreciative Leadership [9]. Appreciative Leadership is therefore now presented as an actual approach to leadership, where together with systemic thinking, it is used as a general leadership style. As such, there is nothing wrong with the attempt at using AI as a leadership approach since it is well-founded and well-considered – the problem is still just that Appreciative Leadership has nothing to do with “anerkendelse” (recognition). Fundamentally, Appreciative Leadership is not about appreciating or fulfilling the need for recognition of the employee, which AI never did either as a method of inquiry. I am therefore stipulating that the choice of the word “anerkendelse” is a problem since, in light of the expectations it leads to as a title, it fails to deliver what employees hope to receive. Put simply, it can be argued that it indirectly lies to the employee by announcing that the place of work will now exhibit more recognition by using this form of leadership.

The leadership style is based on four “anerkendende praksiformer” (forms of practice for recognition), which work as tools for the leader so that he/she can generate a positive atmosphere, attitude, and approach towards the work with employees. Using these forms of practice, the manager must be able to “... get more

out of his/her employees" [10]. Among other things, this applies to employee engagement, effort, understanding of situations and work drive. The goal is to improve these things in the employee so as to increase efficiency. Despite the outward appearance of having a great human focus, Appreciative Leadership is still an approach that targets the organization's production and hence growth, so its "appreciation" of the employee continues to be focused on this. Despite the fact that the consultancy industry and various authors have a tendency to proclaim Appreciative Leadership as a possibly life philosophy "... which exceeds the framework of the working life and goes in and affects all relations you are part of." [11], it still originates and was created by the purpose of generating growth for the organization. This is important to remember since the existentialist recognition is an individual and human need that, contrary to AI, always focuses on the individual's well-being. Apart from the way the theories use the word differently, the purpose of the theories is similarly diametrically opposed.

The fact that the word "anerkendelse", as the primary element in the focus of the AI method, causes confusion among employees and leaders can also be seen in Danish AI literature. After 2006, when the book "Kamp om Anerkendelse" (Struggle for Recognition) was published, Kenneth's Anerkendelsesteori (Recognition Theory) began to weave its way into Appreciative Leadership. This is seen in particular in the publications of Maja Loua Haslebo and Danielle Bjerre Lyndgaard from 2007 and 2008 [12,13]. In both cases, there are no direct references to Kenneth's theory in the main text, and it is therefore both striking and misleading that their bibliography includes both Honneth from 2003 and 2006, which unquestionably gives the impression that it acted as inspiration. Despite this, nowhere in the books do the authors address that Kenneth's use of the word "anerkendelse" is not the same as in the AI method, which is a good example of why the misunderstanding and confusion came about. It comes across as an uncritical and loose connection to the theory and the belief that the use of the same word implies the same meaning. This tendency is repeated in later literature; however, here we see a few attempts at incorporating Honneth more thoroughly [14,15]. Despite these attempts, there is still a tendency, which has undeniably contributed to the fact that, beyond the normal understanding of the word "anerkendelse" in Appreciative Leadership, there is theoretical confusion concerning the relationship between the theories. The claim is not that managers and consultants who teach and use Appreciative Leadership are not aware of what the approach involves, but as theoreticians, we should remain critical to what the selected leadership approach does and does not do. Appreciative Leadership does not meet the need for recognition of the employees, and we should therefore not use Kenneth's Anerkendelsesteori (Recognition Theory) in the same breath. My claim is that, when a leader starts practicing Appreciative Leadership (which in Danish uses the term "anerkendelse"), this will unquestionably lead to an expectation among employees about receiving more recognition as individuals.

Expectations that you can certainly have in your personal life, but which risk a sense of disappointment at work since Appreciative Management is precisely not about fulfilling this need in the employee.

Consultants and leaders must not give the employees the impression that they will find a more compassionate social arena at work because Appreciative Leadership is being used. Over the last 20 years, leadership and organizational theory has focused more on the employee as a person, but it is not possible to establish the same opportunities for social relations at work as in one's personal life; particularly not in a leader-employee relationship. As long as the organization is created with the goal of providing a service or product and with the employee as the means to achieving this, the employees cannot expect the same conditions or opportunities as in their personal lives. On this basis, it is therefore neither fair nor beneficial that the employee gets a false expectation that the existentialist need for recognition will be met at work. This is still something that belongs primarily to your personal life since the social relations we enter into with our leader are controlled and created on the basis of a power distribution and a hierarchical difference.

This leads to the false belief that the line between the personal and working life is being erased since Appreciative Leadership gives the impression of functioning as both a leadership style and an outlook on life. We risk giving false hopes to employees that the expectations they have of their fellow humans in the personal lives can be transferred to their working lives. However, the problem is that the employee cannot expect the same from a leader since the relationship is controlled by the purpose and financial situation of the organization. By calling it Appreciative Leadership and constantly emphasizing Appreciation (using the Danish word "Anerkendelse"), a mismatch is established between what the employees think they will receive and what will actually take place. I will not claim to be an authority on whether Appreciative Leadership works as an approach or leadership style, however I am concerned about the use of the word "anerkendelse" since we risk promising the employee something that cannot be provided.

## **Conclusion**

The extreme increase in the use of the term "anerkendelse" (recognition) in Danish organizational culture with employees, leaders and consultants testifies to the increasing need for recognition in the working life. However, we must not fool ourselves into thinking that Appreciative Leadership fulfills this need – the existentialist recognition cannot be replaced by a leader's positive focus or properly asked questions. This is not a leadership tool that will erase the lines between the personal and working life. AI is a well-documented method in Danish organizations, but there is a need for separating the theories and removing the expectations and idea that the leader can enter into a relationship with the employee on the same



level as relationships in your personal life. The leader and employee exist in an interplay with each other due to the purpose of the organization. We should not attempt to manipulate things with this notion by making the relationship softer than what is possible, as power and hierarchy are a condition for the current state of the relationship. However, leaders can offer recognition to other people – also colleagues and employees – they just cannot encourage the belief that Appreciative Leadership is a means to that end.

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## Notes

1. This article originates from my master's thesis from The Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Aarhus University. Most subjects and arguments are more thoroughly analyzed and discussed in that paper, where I address the problems outlined in this article more thoroughly: **Højbæk, T. R. (2016)**. *Organisationens Anerkendelsesparadoks: Medarbejderens anerkendelsesmuligheder i den danske organisation*. Aarhus: Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Aarhus University
2. **Cooperrider, D. & Srivastva, S. (1987)**. Appreciative Inquiry in organizational life. The call for executive appreciation. In R. Woodman & W. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development*, Vol. 1, pp. 129-169. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Graduate School of Business and Public Administration.
3. **Dall, M. O. & Hansen, S. (Red.). (2001)**. *Slip anerkendelsen løs! Appreciative Inquiry i organisationsudvikling*. Copenhagen: Frydenlund
4. **Dalsgaard, C., Meisner, T. & Voetmann, K. (Red.). (2002)**. *Forvandling – Værdsættende samtale i teori og praksis*. Copenhagen: Psykologisk Forlag
5. **Willig, R. (2012, s. 1)**, Når den anerkendende tilgang bliver positivitetsfascisme. I: *Dagbladet Information*, January 23, 2012
6. **Honneth, A. (2006)**. *Kamp om anerkendelse. Sociale konflikters moralske grammatik*. (A. Jørgensen, Trans.) Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag. (Original work published 1992)

7. **Honneth, A. (2003).** *Behovet for anerkendelse. En tekstsamling.* Edited by Rasmus Willig. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag
8. For a more thorough review of Axel Kenneth's Recognition Theory cf. note 1, ch. 2.
9. **Molly-Søholm, T. & Molly, A. (2006).** Anerkendende udviklingsledelse – Appreciative Inquiry som grundtænkning i ledelse og en metodisk tilgang til udvikling og forandring. I *Erhvervspsykologi*, vol, 4, no 1, s. 52-74
10. **Molly-Søholm, T. & Molly, A. (2006, p 66)**, see note 9
11. **Molly-Søholm, T. & Molly, A. (2006, p 69)**, see note 9
12. **Haslebo, M. L. & Lyndgaard, D. B. (2007).** *Anerkendende ledelse: Skab mod, engagement og bedre resultater.* Copenhagen: Psykologisk Forlag
13. **Haslebo, M. L. & Lyndgaard, D. B. (2008).** *Anerkendende HR og organisationsudvikling: Skab mening, handlekraft og bedre resultater.* Copenhagen: Dansk Psykologisk Forlag
14. **Hornstrup, C. & Johansen, T. (2013).** *Strategisk relationel ledelse – Systemisk ledelse af forandringer.* Copenhagen: Dansk Psykologisk Forlag
15. **Holm, I. S. (2010).** *Anerkendelse i ledelse.* Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Rasmus Thisted Højbæk, born 1990, holds an M.Sc. in Psychology from Aarhus University – with a thesis on appreciative theory and employee well-being. His focus in the field of organizational psychology is inspired by the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School, where in particular, he prioritizes the well-being of people in Danish workplaces.

Over the last five years, he has worked with critical social theory, consisting of Axel Honneth, Hartmut Rosa and Rasmus Willig.

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