FEATURED ARTICLE

Appreciative Followership

A Generative Orientation Driving Reciprocal Flourishing

Lindsey N. Godwin, PhD
Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University

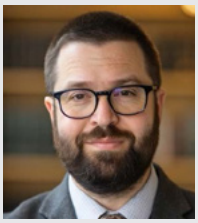
Anton Shufutinsky, PhD, DSc
Institute for Applied Behavioral and Organizational Sciences, Sacred Heart University

Tojo Thatchenkery, PhD
Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University

Abstract
Although followership scholarship has moved beyond viewing followers as passive recipients of leadership, follower agency is still commonly framed in terms of compliance, resistance, courage, or support. This conceptual paper introduces *appreciative followership*, a generative orientation toward inquiry, strengths, and co-creation enacted from the follower role. Within the proposed framework, appreciative followership names the orientation, generative co-creation describes how it is enacted, and reciprocal flourishing describes the mutually reinforcing developmental process it can set in motion. The framework is illustrated through an organization development intervention within the Health and Safety Department of a Fortune 500 science and technology corporation. Rather than measuring flourishing directly, the case documents increased trust, shared authority, follower participation, collaborative innovation, and sustained improvements in safety practices and outcomes—changes consistent with movement toward reciprocal flourishing. The paper offers implications for organization development practitioners seeking to cultivate leadership and followership together and to create structures through which follower knowledge, inquiry, and initiative can meaningfully shape organizational action.
Keywords: appreciative followership, reciprocal flourishing, generative co-creation, Appreciative Inquiry, leadership-followership dynamics, organization development

Research, literature, and practice surrounding the topic of leadership are abundant in practically any field (Shufutinsky & Jamieson, 2026). Among the early mistakes of scholars on the topic, however, have been the overwhelming focus on the leader and a lack of exploration of followership and leader-follower dynamics and how they impact leadership effectiveness (Riggio, 2014; Thompson et al., 2026). More recently, calls to take followership seriously have grown increasingly prominent. Over the past three decades, scholars have made compelling cases that leadership cannot be fully understood, let alone developed, without attending to the role of followers and the dynamics of following (Chaleff, 1995; Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015; Kelley, 1992; Riggio, 2014; Thompson et al., 2026; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The field has moved from treating followers as passive recipients of leader influence to recognizing them as

Dr. Lindsey Godwin is an award-winning scholar, teacher, and "possibilitizer" who works globally to help organizations build on their strengths and create transformational change. She is Professor of Organizational Behavior and the Covia–David L. Cooperrider Professor of Appreciative Inquiry at Case Western Reserve University. Before returning to her alma mater, she spent 15 years at Champlain College, holding the Robert P. Stiller Endowed Chair of Management and serving as founding Academic Director of the Cooperrider Center.



After over 25 years of leadership and management experience in the Armed Forces and Fortune 500 corporations, **Dr. Anton Shufutinsky** is the Founding Director of the PhD in Organization Development, Change, and Effectiveness (ODCE) Program in the Institute for Applied Behavioral and Organizational Sciences (IABOS) at Sacred Heart University. For IABOS, he is also Director for Innovation and Strategic Collaboration and Founding Chair of ODSHUCON. He is an award winning researcher and scholar practitioner.

Dr. Tojo Thatchenkery is Professor and Director of the Organization Development and Knowledge Management graduate program at George Mason University. He developed the concept of Appreciative Intelligence®, which is the subject of the upcoming book *Disrupt the Linear: How Appreciative Intelligence Empowers Leaders to Build a Circular Economy*. He also introduced the concepts of Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge (ASK) and quiet leadership, both of which have influenced research and practice in organizational learning, knowledge management, innovation, and leadership.

Authors' Contact Information:

Lindsey N. Godwin, PhD
Weatherhead School of Management
Case Western Reserve University
Email: Lindsey.godwin@gmail.com

Anton Shufutinsky, PhD, DSc
Institute for Applied Behavioral and Organizational Sciences
Sacred Heart University
Email: shufutinskya@sacredheart.edu

Tojo Thatchenkery, PhD
Schar School of Policy and Government
George Mason University
Email: thatchen@gmu.edu

active co-producers of the leadership process, to questioning whether the leader-follower distinction even maps onto how people experience organizational life (Kempster et al., 2021). Some scholars have argued persuasively that leadership and followership development should happen together, for everyone in the organization, because the same people move fluidly between leading and following across situations (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015; Riggio, 2014). These are important advances. And yet, despite this theoretical progress and recognition of the importance of followership, one question has gone largely unasked: what can followership generate? The field has focused extensively on what followers do in response to leaders. It has paid far less attention to what followership can build, create, and set in motion.

As long as leadership is constructed from the individualistic mode, as is the case with most Western models, the role of followers may stay invisible. A participatory and democratized model recognizes the generative nature of leadership. Consider the state of leadership development. Organizations invest tens of billions annually in programs designed to build individual leader capability (Yemiscigil et al., 2023). For the most part, these programs operate as if leadership were a property of the individual leader, developed through individual effort. The followership literature has demonstrated otherwise. Leadership is relational, emerging from the interplay of leading and following behaviors that may or may not align with formal roles (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Shamir, 2007). If leadership is co-produced, then the quality of followership shapes the quality of leadership, and the development of one necessarily involves the development of the other. But what kind of followership actually produces this mutual development? And what kind of followership regenerates the broader organizational system?

We propose the construct of appreciative followership, a generative orientation toward inquiry, strengths, and co-creation that operates from the following posture. In doing so, we introduce generativity as a dimension of followership that the field has not yet explored. We argue that when followership becomes appreciative, a process of reciprocal flourishing can emerge through which leaders, followers, and the organizational systems they inhabit develop together. We develop this argument in conversation with the followership literature, ground it in the principles of Appreciative Inquiry and complementary theoretical frameworks, and illustrate it through a case from a Fortune 500 organization in which an Appreciative Inquiry-based intervention was intentionally designed to position followers as co-creators and co-innovators, with sustained results over a two-year period.

Background

Illustrative Case in Brief

Before developing our conceptual argument, we briefly introduce the organizational intervention that serves as an illustrative case throughout the paper. We return to the case in later sections to show how appreciative followership was enacted and how it produced outcomes consistent with movement toward reciprocal flourishing.

As part of an organization development and effectiveness consultation with the Health and Safety Department of a Fortune 500 science and technology corporation, the C-suite sponsor identified strengthening the organization's safety culture as an overarching goal.

An extensive organizational assessment using the Nuclear Organization Systems Model (Shufutinsky & Jamieson, 2026) informed the initial intervention design. The facilitation plan was co-developed by C-suite and union leaders, Health and Safety staff, and an organization development consultant, with opportunities for participants to continue shaping the process as it unfolded.

The intervention took the form of a Stakeholder Systems Symposium (S3), a participative large-group organization development method incorporating a modified Appreciative Inquiry summit. The leadership team named the intervention the Appreciative Leadership-Followership Safety Summit (ALFSS) Series. It consisted of five meetings held over nine months. The first brought together C-suite leaders and the Health and Safety Department to establish a shared foundation; four subsequent meetings expanded

participation to include Health and Safety staff and leaders and staff members from across various departments. Participants in these subsequent meetings worked in cross-functional groups known as WorkLiFe Groups, which were formed to bring together knowledge from across organizational levels and departments and to carry the co-created safety initiatives into implementation.

Over the following two years, the intervention was associated with a 29% reduction in the recordable incident rate and substantial, sustained increases in near-miss reporting, inspections, training, and employee participation in safety activities. Employees across organizational levels contributed their knowledge, shaped priorities, and co-created and implemented safety practices rather than simply receiving a leadership-designed program.

To understand what this intervention reveals about the generative potential of followership, we first situate it within the evolution of followership scholarship and the assumptions that have shaped the field.

Literature Review

Followership: Where the Field Stands

For most of the twentieth century, followers appeared in leadership research as an afterthought. They were the people to be motivated, directed, or transformed (Bass, 1985). When scholars did attend to followers, they tended to study how followers construct leaders through attribution and social identity processes (Hogg, 2001; Meindl, 1990), or how leaders and followers engage in mutual influence through relational exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hollander, 1992, 2012). Followership did not receive broader sustained theoretical and empirical attention until the 2000s, although important foundational contributions appeared earlier. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) organized the emerging field into two frameworks: a role-based approach examining how people enact followership within hierarchical positions, and a constructionist approach studying how leadership and followership are co-created through relational interaction. Both have generated productive scholarship and have helped make the case that followership deserves the same sustained attention that leadership has long received.

Within this growing body of work, several contributions have shaped the conversation about what effective followership looks like. Kelley (1988, 1992) argued that the best followers are self-managing, committed, competent, and courageous, and mapped followers along dimensions of independent critical thinking and active engagement. Chaleff (1995) deepened the emphasis on courage, framing effective followers as partners who vigorously support the organizational mission while also holding leaders accountable through honest, sometimes difficult feedback. His later work on intelligent disobedience (Chaleff, 2015) examined how followers can and should refuse directives that are unethical or harmful. Kellerman (2008) foregrounded engagement as the critical variable, ranging from complete detachment to deep commitment. Hollander (1992) emphasized that followership is something actively accorded by followers through a transactional social exchange, and that leaders earn latitude through demonstrated competence and alignment with group values. Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and colleagues (2010) brought empirical specificity to these ideas, showing that followers hold different schemas about their roles and that context, including leader style and organizational climate, determines whether they can enact their preferred orientation. More recently, scholars have argued that leadership and followership development should happen together for everyone in organizations, since the same people move between leading and following across situations (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015), and that uncritical adoption of leadership frameworks is itself a followership problem (Shufutinsky et al., 2023).

These are noteworthy contributions that have moved the field forward, though, most of them organize followership along a spectrum that runs from compliance to resistance. The behavioral landscape of followership research is organized along that spectrum. Kelley's passive followers comply; his exemplary followers exercise courageous conscience. Chaleff's framework asks when to support and when to challenge. Carsten and Uhl-Bien's (2013) work on ethical followership examines the conditions under

which followers obey unethical requests versus constructively resisting. The proactivity literature documents the creative ways employees exercise voice and initiative (Grant & Ashford, 2008), and studies how leaders receive and respond to that initiative (Whiting et al., 2012).

Followers have typically been positioned as recipients of leadership—individuals who encounter a leader's direction and decide how to respond: go along, push back, or find some calibrated position in between. Compliance and resistance are real dimensions of organizational life, and both matter. At times following a leader's direction is the right move; at other times, the most consequential act of followership is to refuse. Intelligent disobedience is something organizations genuinely need. The spectrum itself is not wrong, but it may be incomplete.

Kempster et al. (2021) found that experienced managers in an Executive Master of Business Administration cohort did not locate "follower" as an identity they recognized in their own organizational lives. They understood the concept but did not see themselves in it. One reading of this finding is that the word follower carries too much negative baggage (Hoption et al., 2012; Kelley, 2008). Another suggests that if the available scripts for followership are to comply or to resist, then many people will find that neither captures what they actually do at work. They are building and connecting and contributing to something that feels shared. When leadership and followership are working well, people experience belonging to a common endeavor (Block, 2008; Born, 2014), and that experience has little to do with obedience or dissent.

The followership field has made a convincing case that followers matter, that leadership is co-produced, and that new theorizing is needed (Riggio, 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). What it has not yet offered is a generative account of followership: a framework oriented around what followership can build with the capacity to ask different questions, to see what is working and what is possible, and to co-create organizational life from any position in the system. That is what we turn to next.

Discussion

A Third Posture: Appreciative Followership

If the followership literature has organized itself around a compliance-resistance spectrum, what lies outside that spectrum? What does followership look like when followers are doing something other than going along or pushing back?

We propose that there is a third posture, one that is fundamentally different in orientation from either compliance or resistance. We call this third posture appreciative followership. It is enacted through generative co-creation: inquiry, dialogue, and collaborative action through which followers and leaders build possibilities together. In this posture, followers engage with leadership and with the broader organizational system by surfacing strengths, asking questions that open new possibilities, and co-designing the structures, processes, and relationships that shape how work gets done. The energy is directed toward building something rather than toward accepting or contesting what already exists, and although this concept includes it, it moves beyond co-creation of leadership alone.

Generative co-creation is relational in a broader sense. Followers operating from this posture are engaging with the organizational system itself: its culture, its climate, its processes, its capacity for learning and adaptation. They are co-creating the conditions in which everyone works, which means the impact extends well beyond any single leader-follower relationship.

This distinction matters because compliance and resistance, for all their differences, share a common reactive orientation. Compliance takes the current reality as given and works within it; resistance takes the current reality as problematic and works against it. Even constructive resistance (Tepper et al., 2001) and proactive voice (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), which represent some of

the more sophisticated forms of follower agency in the literature, are still oriented around the question of how to respond to what has been initiated by leadership. The follower receives a signal from the system and calibrates a response.

Generative co-creation starts from a different question. Instead of asking "Should I go along with this or push back on it?" the follower operating from a generative posture asks something closer to "What is working here, what is possible, and what can we build together?" This is a creative and constructive orientation, and it positions the follower as someone who is shaping organizational life, not just responding to it.

Generative co-creation also extends beyond the leader-follower relationship. The compliance-resistance frame tends to center the dyad: the follower responds to the leader, the leader responds to the follower's response. Generative co-creation is relational in a broader sense. Followers operating from this posture are engaging with the organizational system itself: its culture, its climate, its processes, its capacity for learning and adaptation. They are co-creating the conditions in which everyone works, which means the impact extends well beyond any single leader-follower relationship.

This is true interpersonally, and it is also true intrapersonally. The compliance-resistance frame treats leaders and followers as distinct people occupying distinct roles. In practice, most leaders also follow, and most followers also lead, across a range of settings and situations. The same person may lead a project team in the morning and follow a colleague's direction on a cross-functional initiative in the afternoon. When someone adopts a generative posture in their following, it also develops their capacity for leading, because the orientation toward inquiry, strengths, and co-creation does not switch off when the role shifts. Generative co-creation develops the internal relationship between leading and following that exists within each person. It builds a fluency in moving between the two postures that a compliance-or-resistance frame does not cultivate.

Practical consequences follow from this conceptual shift. If followership is understood through the compliance-resistance lens, then followership development looks like training people when to comply, when to speak up, and how to do both skillfully. These are useful capacities, but they are also limited ones. A generative orientation requires something different: the ability to see strengths in a system, to ask questions that shift the quality of conversation, and to participate in designing what comes next. This is a learnable, developable capacity, and it calls for different kinds of development than assertiveness training or empowerment programs.

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Compliance and resistance remain important dimensions of organizational life. There are situations that call for deference to legitimate authority, and situations that call for courageous refusal. Generative co-creation does not replace these responses; rather, it expands the repertoire. It names a posture that has always existed in organizational life, in those moments when people come together to build something meaningful, but that the followership literature has not sufficiently given language to.

What, then, enables this posture? What makes generative co-creation possible? We draw on Appreciative Inquiry (Godwin et al., 2026) and complementary frameworks to address that question.

Generative co-creation depends on participation, reciprocity, and mutuality. Language matters because the ways people describe leadership and organizational reality shape what becomes thinkable and possible (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004). Yet co-creation requires more than constructing

meaning through language; it requires structures and relationships through which people can participate in inquiry, contribute their knowledge, influence decisions, and shape collective action. This commitment to democratization is foundational to organization development and central to Appreciative Inquiry, which treats organizational members not as recipients of change but as participants in creating it (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). In the context of followership, reciprocity is especially important: followers help construct leadership, leaders respond to and are changed by follower engagement, and both help shape the shared work they are attempting to advance. It is through this interplay of language, participation, and reciprocal influence that generative co-creation becomes possible.

The Generative Orientation: What Appreciative Inquiry Contributes

We describe generative co-creation as the enactment of appreciative followership: a way of inquiring, building, and co-designing across leader-follower roles. Any posture requires practices and principles that sustain it. So the question becomes: what enables a follower to show up generatively, consistently, across the varied and often pressured situations of organizational life?

We argue that Appreciative Inquiry offers a theoretical and practical foundation for the generative orientation. Appreciative Inquiry has been extensively developed as a methodology for organizational change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider et al., 2008), as a framework for leadership (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010), and as an approach to knowledge management (Thatchenkery & Chowdhry, 2007). It has been applied across sectors, geographies, and scales, from small team interventions to multi-stakeholder summits involving thousands of participants. What has received far less attention is what Appreciative Inquiry's core principles imply when they are enacted from a followership posture. We believe that the implications are significant, and that they provide the conceptual architecture for understanding how generative followership works.

Appreciative Inquiry rests on a set of interconnected principles, each of which carries specific meaning for followers. To begin, the constructionist principle holds that organizations are created and sustained through human interaction, conversation, and shared meaning-making (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Language plays a central role in this process. As Gergen and Thatchenkery (2004) have shown, the way organizational members talk about their experience has generative power, shaping what the organization becomes. From a followership perspective, this principle suggests something powerful: followers are already constructing organizational reality through the way they talk about their work, their leaders, and their organization. They are never merely receiving a reality that someone else has built. Every conversation, every question, every interpretation is an act of construction. A follower who understands this recognizes that they have agency in shaping the organization simply by how they engage with it.

The simultaneity principle holds that inquiry and change happen at the same time (Cooperrider et al., 2008). The moment we ask a question, we begin to create movement in the direction of that question. A follower does not need to wait for authority, permission, or a formal change initiative to influence the system. The act of asking a generative question, one that surfaces strengths, invites possibility, or reframes a challenge, is itself an intervention. Asking shifts the conversation, and the system begins to move.

The poetic principle holds that organizations, like great works of literature, are open to ongoing interpretation, and that any aspect of organizational life can be chosen as a topic for appreciative attention (Cooperrider et al., 2008). This principle is especially relevant for followers because it means that the generative orientation is not limited to formal occasions or sanctioned roles. A follower can choose to attend to what is working in a team meeting, in a hallway conversation, in a moment of difficulty. The choice of what to notice and what to name is available to everyone, regardless of position.

The anticipatory principle holds that the images we carry of the future shape our present behavior (Cooperrider, 1990). Followers who

hold generative images of what the organization can become act differently than followers who see the future as determined by leaders or constrained by current conditions. Anticipatory imagination, the capacity to envision and move toward a compelling future, is a form of agency that does not depend on formal authority.

The positive principle holds that positive questions, positive emotions, and positive relational connections generate the energy and commitment that sustain change over time (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Fredrickson, 2009). For followers, this means that the emotional quality of their engagement matters. Followers who bring appreciative attention to their work, who name what is going well and build on it, create a different kind of relational field than followers who lead with critique or resignation. This is not about being uncritically positive. It is about recognizing that the questions we ask and the stories we tell about organizational life have consequences for what that life becomes.

Taken together, these principles describe an orientation that is available to anyone in the system, regardless of role or rank. They do not require formal authority, a leadership title, or an invitation to participate. They describe a way of engaging with organizational life that is inherently generative: constructing reality through conversation, creating change through inquiry, choosing what to notice and amplify, imagining forward, and building relational energy.

Complementary Frameworks

Appreciative Inquiry's principles do not stand alone. Several complementary frameworks illuminate different facets of the generative orientation and help ground it in practices that followers can enact.

Schein's (2013) concept of humble inquiry describes the posture that underlies generative engagement. Humble inquiry is the art of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, driven by genuine curiosity and interest in the other person. For followers, humble inquiry is the practice of approaching leaders, colleagues, and the organization itself with a stance of learning rather than judgment. It is the interpersonal discipline that makes the constructionist and simultaneity principles actionable in everyday interaction.

Torbert's (2004) action inquiry offers a practice of simultaneous action and reflection. Action inquiry invites people to attend to what they are doing, how they are framing the situation, and what assumptions they are carrying, all in real time. For followers operating from a generative posture, this kind of reflective practice is essential. It helps followers notice when they have defaulted to compliance or resistance, and it opens the possibility of choosing a different response. Action inquiry gives the generative orientation a reflexive dimension: followers are acting in the system and observing their own action at the same time.

Dutton's (2003) work on high-quality connections identifies the relational substrate that generative co-creation depends on. High-quality connections are characterized by mutual regard, trust, and active engagement, and they can occur in brief interactions, not just in long-term relationships. Dutton's research shows that these connections are physiologically and psychologically energizing, and that they build capacity for both individuals and organizations. Generative followership, we suggest, both depends on and produces high-quality connections. The appreciative orientation creates conditions for connection, and those connections in turn sustain the generative posture over time.

Shufutinsky et al. (2023) introduced the concept of thought followership in the OD context, describing practitioners' tendency to adopt published models and frameworks without verifying their empirical support. Their finding that more than 60% of the OD professionals surveyed acknowledged this practice illustrates the risks of uncritical and deferential followership, even within a field committed to evidence-based practice. Appreciative followership offers a generative response by developing followers' capacity to inquire, question, and co-create. This involves active, evidence-attentive engagement with ideas and practices, grounded in appreciative attention rather than passive adoption. It is neither uncritical acceptance nor reflexive resistance. Instead, it asks: What is supported? What is working? What can we learn? And what might we build together?

A Developable Capacity

The generative orientation is a capacity, not a personality trait. It can be learned, practiced, and cultivated. Some people may arrive at it more naturally than others, just as some people take more readily to leadership or to public speaking. We posit, however, that principles and practices described in this section are teachable. They can be embedded in how organizations design work, develop people, and structure their conversations. In our framework, appreciative followership names the orientation, generative co-creation names how it is enacted, and reciprocal flourishing names the mutually reinforcing developmental process it can set in motion. It is to that developmental process that we turn next.

Reciprocal Flourishing: The Mechanism in Theory and Practice

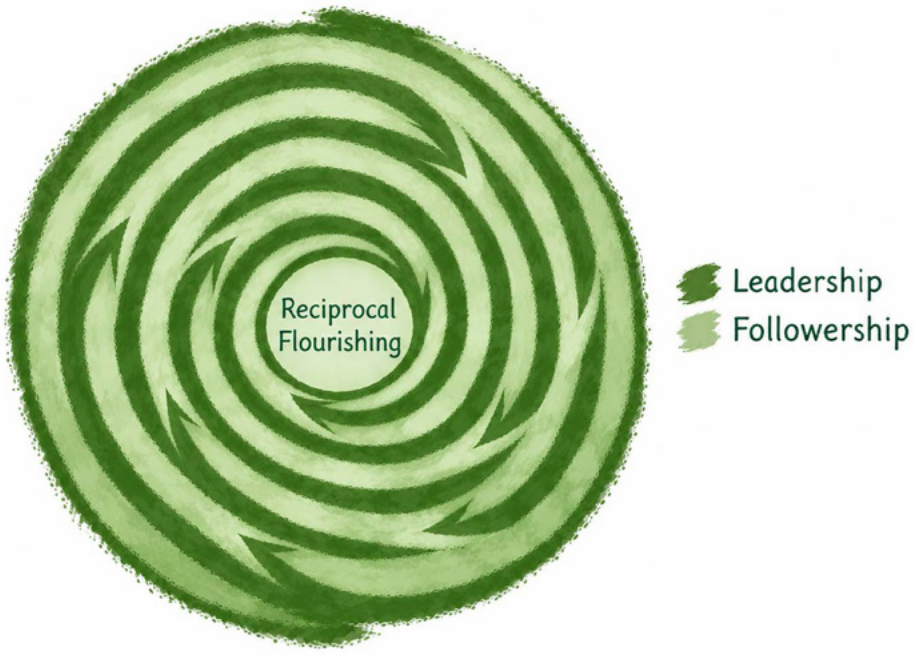
What happens when followers engage from this generative orientation? What changes in the follower, the leader, and the broader system? We propose that what emerges is reciprocal flourishing: a virtuous spiral in which leadership and followership develop together, each continually shaping and strengthening the other (see *Figure 1*). As appreciative followership expands followers' capacity to inquire and co-create, it also invites greater openness and responsiveness from leaders. Those changes in leadership, in turn, create conditions for deeper follower engagement. *Figure 1* represents this reciprocity as two interwoven movements: neither leadership nor followership develops independently, and their mutual development can move the broader organizational system toward flourishing. Although followers can initiate an Appreciative Inquiry process without formal authority, reciprocal flourishing cannot be produced by followers alone. It depends on leader responsiveness and on structures that allow follower contributions to influence what happens next. *Figure 1* appears fuzzy in places, and this represents the blurred lines that can exist between leading and following as they move simultaneously toward flourishing.

The Concept

The idea that leadership and followership develop each other is not new. Hollander (1992) described leadership as a social exchange in which leaders earn influence through demonstrated competence and alignment with group values, and followers

Figure 1

The Leadership-Followership Reciprocal Spiral (Adapted from Shufutinsky et al., 2023)



accord or withhold that influence based on their ongoing assessment of the leader's contributions. The relationship is inherently reciprocal. What Hollander's framework does not fully address is the developmental dimension: how the quality of followership changes the leader over time, and how that change in the leader opens new possibilities for how followers can engage.

Liborius (2014) moved closer to this question with the construct of "worthiness of being followed," showing that leader character qualities such as integrity, humility, and gratitude significantly predict followers' willingness to follow, their organizational citizenship behavior, and their voice behavior. These findings establish that followership is not just a response to leader behavior in the moment. It is a response to who the leader is, and particularly to the quality of the leader's character as experienced by followers.

Our argument extends this line of thinking. We suggest that the character qualities Liborius identified are not only prerequisites for willing followership, they are also, in part, produced by it. When followers engage appreciatively, when they ask generative questions, surface strengths, and co-design with leaders rather than simply deferring or contesting, they create relational conditions that call forth the leader's better qualities. A leader who is met with genuine inquiry becomes more open. A leader whose strengths are recognized and built upon becomes more trusting. A leader who is invited into co-creation rather than positioned as the sole decision-maker has room to be humbler. The followership shapes the leadership, and the leadership shapes the followership, and the spiral builds over time.

We call this reciprocal flourishing, drawing on Cooperrider and Fry's (2012) concept of mirror flourishing, which describes the dynamic by which helping others flourish contributes to one's own flourishing. Reciprocal flourishing situates this idea in the followership domain. It describes what happens when followers, through their generative engagement, create the conditions for leaders to develop, and when that development in turn creates conditions for followers to engage more fully; the flourishing is mutual and ongoing.

Seligman (2011) conceptualized flourishing as encompassing positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Reciprocal flourishing applies this idea to the leader-follower relationship. It does not suggest that a single interaction produces flourishing; rather, it describes a mutually reinforcing developmental process through which leaders and followers create conditions that can support one another's engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment over time. Because these interactions are embedded within an organizational system, their effects may also extend into the structures, practices, and culture surrounding the relationship. The case that follows does not directly measure flourishing; it illustrates the relational and systemic conditions through which reciprocal flourishing may develop.

As leaders listened and responded with openness, they signaled that broader participation could influence what happened next. That response created space for further inquiry and contribution; as more employees engaged, leaders gained a fuller understanding of the organizational system and its possibilities. The quality of the conversation changed, strengthening both the relationships among participants and the decisions they made together.

A Case of Appreciative Followership in Practice

The case introduced earlier illustrates how generative co-creation can reshape both an organizational process and the leadership-followership relationships surrounding it. At the outset of the engagement, the Health and Safety Department consisted of 11 Health and Safety Business Partners (HSBPs). Although the Research, Manufacturing, and Utilities divisions provided additional resources, the HSBPs consistently

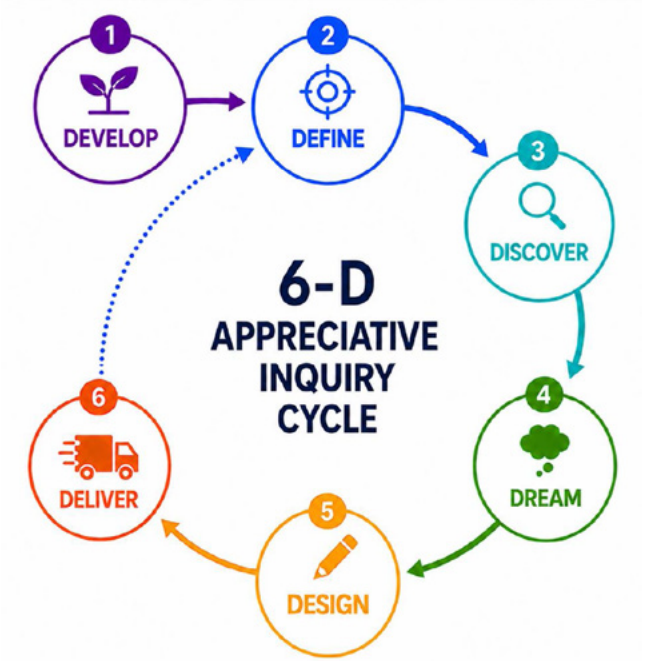
reported feeling unable to achieve the organization's safety goals. A three-week organization development and effectiveness assessment revealed a strong and widely shared desire for a robust safety culture. It also found that the existing safety program was largely driven by the C-suite and Health and Safety Department, punitive in its orientation, and more likely to produce performative compliance than meaningful participation and innovation.

Designing a Participative Appreciative Inquiry Intervention

The assessment findings, organized using the Nuclear Organization Systems Model (Shufutinsky & Jamieson, 2026), informed an initial facilitation plan co-developed by C-suite and union leaders, Health and Safety staff, and an organization development, change, and effectiveness consultant. Importantly, the plan remained open to continued development by participants as the process unfolded.

The resulting intervention used a Stakeholder Systems Symposium (S3), a participative large-group organization development method incorporating a modified Appreciative Inquiry summit. Named the Appreciative Leadership-Followership Safety Summit (ALFSS) Series by the leadership team, the intervention consisted of five meetings held over nine months. The first meeting brought together C-suite leaders and the Health and Safety Department to establish a shared foundation. Four subsequent meetings expanded participation to include Health and Safety staff as well as leaders and staff from across various departments.

Figure 2
The Modified 6-D Appreciative Inquiry Cycle (Adapted from Godwin et al., 2026)



The intervention followed a modified six-phase Appreciative Inquiry cycle: Develop, Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver (see *Figure 2*). The *Develop* stage served as a preparatory phase in which participants built shared understanding, relationships, and readiness for collaborative inquiry. *Deliver* replaced the traditional Destiny phase to emphasize the implementation of the plans and practices participants had designed together. A seventh phase, Drive, was identified through the post-intervention findings. *Drive* was not an additional meeting or formal phase of the facilitated cycle; it describes how participants sustained and extended the generative practices developed through ALFSS into other departments, areas of work, and organizational locations.

The opening meeting developed a common understanding of the organization development process, the components of the organizational system, and their interdependence. The assessment had revealed a genuine commitment to improving safety across the organization, alongside workplace silos and limited ownership of safety within and across those silos. Although annual safety planning included Health and Safety staff and senior leaders from the divisions they served, it offered limited opportunities for employees across the system to contribute their institutional and technical knowledge of the organization's operations, projects, and facilities.

Broadening participation therefore became central to the intervention. Employees from across the system were invited not simply to respond to a safety program designed by leaders, but to contribute knowledge, shape priorities, and participate in creating it. Leader-follower reciprocity, shared ownership, and collaborative

Table 1
Select Quotes from Pre-Intervention Participant Interviews

Select Pre-Intervention Interview Participant Accounts
• "Safety is important, but we all somehow know that revenue reigns supreme, and the only time it's really safety first is when there are labor negotiations."
• "The performance of safety—that's been our culture. We talk about it, and we emphasize it when people get hurt. I think we truly want it, but safety as a side hustle has been our culture, so it's not an easy fit."
• "Safety's stressed, but there's a history of punishment for safety-related incidents and of being somewhat dismissive when employees bring concerns."
• "We're involved, and we guide, but in the end, we're not involved in final decisions even though we're the ones impacted by the hazards."
• "We've heard leadership say, 'We can't do it alone. How do we do it together?' Well, involve the right people, and we'll all make it happen."

innovation became guideposts for the organization's safety culture work.

The Virtuous Spiral in Action

The ALFSS series was designed to activate this reciprocal dynamic through repeated moments of interaction. By asking participants to explore what was already supporting safety and what more might be possible, the process created opportunities for employees to contribute their knowledge rather than merely respond to an existing safety program. As leaders listened and responded with openness, they signaled that broader participation could influence what happened next. That response created space for further inquiry and contribution; as more employees engaged, leaders gained a fuller understanding of the organizational system and its possibilities. The quality of the conversation changed, strengthening both the relationships among participants and the decisions they made together.

This is the simultaneity principle at work in the leader-follower relationship: the inquiry did not merely collect information about the safety culture; it began changing that culture through the act of asking. It is also the constructionist principle in action. Through their interactions, leaders and followers began co-constructing a different understanding of safety, including who possessed relevant knowledge and who could participate in shaping the organization's safety practices.

The contrast with vicious cycles is instructive. Greyvenstein and Cilliers (2012), examining leader-follower dynamics through a systems psychodynamic lens, documented patterns in which followers split their experience of leadership, idealized past leaders at the expense of current ones, and withheld authorization from below. These dynamics became self-reinforcing. Leaders who felt unauthorized became more controlling or distant, deepening follower withdrawal and further diminishing their own capacity to lead. The spiral moved downward.

Evidence from the ALFSS case included pre-intervention interviews, participant reflections collected during or following the intervention, and organizational safety indicators from the pre- and post-intervention years. Pre-intervention assessment interviews were collected from a total of 35 employees, including five C-suite leaders, nine middle managers, and 21 professional staff, including five union members. Interviews conducted during and after the intervention were collected from 43 employees, including five C-suite leaders, 10 senior or middle managers, and 28 staff members. Interview and reflection

Table 2
Participant Accounts of Co-Creation Across the ALFSS Phases

Phase	Representative Quotations	Themes and Dimensions
Develop	• "This was different than in our routines, here we built back-and-forth trust across authority levels." • "We worked together, side-by-side with what felt like genuine trust and reliance on each other." • "The last time I had this much trust with top leaders was in the military." • "The brass appreciated the knowledge we brought—even deferred to it." • "From the first meeting, once they bought in, they were committed to this leader-follower collab."	• Cross-Level Trust • Development • Leader-follower Appreciation • Collaborative Commitment
Define	• "We were excited to see we were all on the same page when we started setting goals." • "We all discussed that things we normally would've dismissed before, we imagined them and set a course to achieve them."	• Excitement • Imaginative Goal-Setting
Discover	• "We all led the conversation at times, and different parts of the project. One team, together." • "They say 'lead your leader,' well here we actually did that, and everyone accepted it." • "There was a constant give-and-take, and everyone was happy for it." • "As a leader, I found it so refreshing to give authority to someone more knowledgeable in the field."	• Mutuality • Reciprocal Leader-follower Relationships

continues

data were reviewed for recurring patterns related to participation, trust, authority, co-creation, and sustained application. Quotations are presented confidentially.

The pre-intervention interviews revealed a similarly self-reinforcing pattern, even as leaders and employees expressed a shared desire for a stronger safety culture. Participants repeatedly described a gap between the organization's stated commitment to safety and their everyday experience, as illustrated in *Table 1*.

Taken together, these accounts depict a system in which safety was highly visible in the organization's language but less consistently embedded in its priorities, structures, and decision-making processes. Production and revenue pressures often superseded safety commitments. Employees could experience responses to safety concerns as punitive or dismissive, while those closest to workplace hazards had limited influence over final decisions. This gap between espoused values and organizational practice weakened perceptions of leader authenticity and discouraged follower voice, reinforcing the downward spiral. At the same time, the interviews revealed a readiness for something different. Employees were not rejecting the goal of a stronger safety culture; they were asking for a meaningful role in creating it.

Reciprocal flourishing offers an alternative to this vicious cycle. Where withheld voice and concentrated decision-making erode

Table 2
continued

Phase	Representative Quotations	Themes and Dimensions
Dream	• "I was amazed how much we could accomplish together, even just in the planning process." • "We created the ideas together, not just input by some and decisions by others." • "Shared Innovation, that was the key." • "It was obvious we worked out ideas that we wouldn't have had if we didn't meet as a complete totem pole."	• Possibilities Co-Created • Imaginative Co-Creation of Ideas and Processes
Design	• "I love it when a plan comes together—like the A-Team. We designed, re-designed, and voila!" • "We had what I'd call Leader-follower coalescence to build the scaffold."	• Plans and Structures Co-Created
Deliver	• "We accomplished so much; 100% of set goals met. We exceeded even our own expectations." • "It may not feel like it, but we actually dreamed big around safety, and we built the dream." • "You may call it skip-level success, and it is, but we skipped the levels. We skipped the hierarchy and it worked." • "Our Safety program is better than ever, and we did that. It's not just talk, check the receipts."	• Successful Outcomes Co-Generated • Generation
Drive	• "Four from my WorkLiFe Group are in my department, and we've continued to work this way. Our overall productivity improved, not just safety." • "It was such a healthy way of doing things, so we're doing it here too. Spread the wealth."	• Spread the Health—Spread the Wealth • Extended Generativity

leader-follower relationships, appreciative engagement can strengthen them. The S3 method and ALFSS intervention were designed to interrupt the existing cycle by broadening participation and creating recurring opportunities for leaders and followers to plan, create, and implement safety practices together. As shown in *Tables 2 and 3*, the process produced a shift toward greater interaction, shared planning, and co-implementation. This was more than increased consultation: employees' institutional and technical knowledge began to shape decisions, while leaders' responsiveness created conditions for deeper follower engagement. Through that reciprocity, leaders and followers began moving together toward a more participative and generative safety culture.

Two Nested Levels of Flourishing

Reciprocal flourishing can be understood at two nested levels. The first is human and relational, encompassing changes within leaders and followers as well as changes in the relationships between them. The second is organizational or systemic, encompassing changes in the structures, practices, and outcomes that those relationships

Table 3
Comparison of Pre- and Post-Intervention Safety Performance and Participation Measures

Measure	Pre-Summit Year	Post-Summit Year	Percent Change
Recordable incident rate	Confidential	Confidential	−29.0%
Near-miss reports	92	223	+142.4%
Site safety inspections	384	1,229	+220.1%
Employees conducting site safety inspections	35	222	+534.3%
Safety committee members	43	135	+214.0%
Hours of hands-on safety training	252	1,620	+542.9%
Human-factors ergonomic assessments completed	21	148	+604.8%

Note. Percent change was calculated as
(post-intervention value − pre-intervention value) ÷ pre-intervention value × 100

help generate. The ALFSS case illustrates movement toward flourishing at both levels.

Human and Relational Flourishing

At the human and relational level, appreciative followership develops both the individuals involved and the relationships between them. Leaders may grow in openness, humility, responsiveness, and trust, while followers may develop greater confidence, voice, and capacity to contribute generatively. This development is both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Because most people move between leading and following across different settings, learning to follow generatively can also strengthen a person's capacity to lead generatively. *Table 2* organizes participants' accounts of how trust, mutuality, shared authority, and co-creation developed across the six facilitated phases of the modified cycle and the emergent post-intervention phase of Drive.

These accounts make both directions of the reciprocal spiral visible. Followers described greater voice, trust, and willingness to lead from their expertise, while leaders described a greater willingness to share authority and defer to knowledge held elsewhere in the system. Each response created conditions for the other. Viewed through the humanistic and holistic foundations of organization development (Shefy & Sadler-Smith, 2006; Stevenson, 2018; Szelwach & Matthews, 2023) and a systems perspective (Shufutinsky & Jamieson, 2026), these reciprocal changes suggest that intentional attention to leader-follower relationships can influence the wider organizational system. This mutually reinforcing pattern is consistent with reciprocal flourishing, although flourishing itself was not directly measured.

Organizational and System-Level Flourishing

The relational changes described in *Table 2* were accompanied by changes in how safety work was organized and carried out. The ALFSS intervention was associated with improvements in safety performance, participation, ownership, and relationships among business partners. Safety performance was assessed through recordable incident rates and near-miss reporting. Participation was reflected in the number of safety inspections conducted, the number of employees participating in inspections, safety committee membership, hands-on training, and ergonomic assessments. *Table 3* summarizes the corresponding pre- and post-intervention indicators.

The recordable incident rate declined by 29%, while near-miss reporting increased by 142.4%. The rise in near-miss reporting should

not be interpreted as evidence of declining safety. Considered alongside the lower incident rate and substantial increases in employee participation, it suggests a greater willingness to identify and report potential hazards before they resulted in recordable incidents.

Participation increased across every reported measure. Site safety inspections more than tripled, while the number of employees conducting inspections increased from 35 to 222. Safety committee membership grew from 43 to 135, hands-on training increased from 252 to 1,620 hours, and completed ergonomic assessments rose from 21 to 148. Each of these improvements was sustained in the following year.

Beyond the quantitative changes shown in *Table 3*, the intervention generated new programs, practices, and structures. Participants created a safety process improvement program, a manager-led inspection program, an Appreciative Inquiry-based "non-blame game" root-cause investigation process, and an internal human-factors ergonomics assessment program. A cross-functional team of mechanical, safety, process, and environmental engineers also designed and manufactured a specially fitted ergonomic chair for two utilities employees whose weekly maintenance work required extremely awkward postures. The organization engaged three external root-cause-analysis providers to deliver on-site instruction in their respective methods and established a budget for semiannual safety speakers, with two workforce sessions during each visit.

Participants also created the motto "Safety: By Everyone, For Everyone" and a renewed "Safety First" campaign that remains active in 2026. The post-intervention phase, *Drive*, captures the extension of these generative practices beyond the immediate intervention. Participants reported applying the collaborative practices developed through ALFSS within their own departments and to work beyond occupational safety. Members of the WorkLiFe Groups also traveled to other company locations to share the processes and outcomes they had co-created. This diffusion beyond the original site illustrates how generative leader-follower relationships can contribute to broader collaboration and organizational learning, creating conditions for continued movement toward system-level flourishing.

When followers are involved as co-creators of a change process, they are not merely implementing someone else's plan; they are helping enact a plan they helped create. They have ownership, understanding, and commitment that runs deeper than compliance with a new directive. When the change process also develops the generative capacity of those involved, the organization gains something that outlasts any single initiative: a population of people who know how to inquire, co-design, and build together.

What Makes This Distinct

Taken together, the participant accounts in *Table 2* and the sustained organizational indicators in *Table 3* clarify why this case is relevant to appreciative followership, rather than simply an example of a successful Appreciative Inquiry intervention. The distinction lies not only in the outcomes but also in where the capacity to inquire, design, and act resided.

Followers were not treated merely as sources of input into a change process controlled by leaders. They contributed their institutional and technical knowledge, helped identify priorities, participated in designing plans and practices, and shared responsibility for implementing what emerged. In this sense, followers helped hold the inquiry, shape the design, and own the outcomes. Their participation had consequence: it influenced decisions and changed how safety work was organized and carried out.

At the same time, followers did not produce these changes alone. Leaders responded by listening, sharing authority, and allowing expertise located elsewhere in the system to influence what happened next. This reciprocity distinguishes appreciative followership from participation understood simply as consultation.

Followers' generative engagement created conditions for greater leader openness and responsiveness, while that responsiveness created conditions for followers to contribute more fully. The result was a mutually reinforcing process that developed followers, leaders, their relationships, and the organizational system they shared. This distinction shifts the practical question from how OD develops leaders alone to how it cultivates the reciprocal capacities and conditions through which leading and following develop together.

Implications for OD Practice

The prevailing approach to leadership development treats the leader as the primary asset. Organizations send individual leaders to professional development programs, provide them with coaches, and assess their growth through individual competency models. The followership literature has long argued that this approach is one-sided and incomplete (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015; Riggio, 2014). Our argument consolidates the point: if leadership is co-produced, and if appreciative followership creates the relational conditions in which leaders develop, then investing in follower capacity is simultaneously investing in leadership quality.

This is a practical reframing, carrying budget and design implications. OD practitioners who are responsible for leadership development can begin asking: what are we doing to develop the followership environment around these leaders? Are we cultivating the generative capacity of the people these leaders work with every day? The reciprocal flourishing framework suggests that the most sustainable path to better leadership runs through better followership, and that developing them in isolation from each other limits both.

Designing for Follower Co-Creation

OD practitioners tend to think carefully about leadership dynamics when designing interventions: who is sponsoring the work, how leaders will be involved, what kind of leadership culture the intervention is trying to build. Followership dynamics rarely receive the same deliberate attention. The framework we have presented, however, suggests they should. When practitioners design with followership in mind, they attend to questions like: how are followers engaging in this process? Is the dynamic between leaders and followers shifting? Are followers developing generative capacity through the work, or simply executing a process someone else designed? These are questions that apply to any OD engagement, whether or not it explicitly uses Appreciative Inquiry as its methodology.

Cultivating Generative Capacity

If the generative orientation is a developable capacity, as we have argued, then it belongs in followership development programs alongside courage, competence, and self-management. What would this look like in practice?

It might look like training people to ask appreciative questions in team settings, meetings, and one-on-one conversations. It could mean coaching that helps individuals notice when they have defaulted to compliance or resistance and practice a generative alternative. Structured reflection practices, drawing on Torbert's (2004) action inquiry, could build the habit of simultaneous action and observation. Organizations could also create regular opportunities for followers to surface what is working, through appreciative interviews, storytelling practices, or strengths-based retrospectives.

The key principle is that generative capacity grows experientially through practice, not through conceptual input. Organizations that want more generative followership need to create conditions in which people can practice it: psychological safety, an inclusive and just work climate, leaders who welcome inquiry from below, and structures that reward contribution over compliance.

Rethinking Followership Assessment

Most organizations do not assess followership at all. When they do, the assessment tends to focus on behavioral dimensions drawn from the compliance-resistance frame: does this person follow directions? Do they speak up when something is wrong? Are they a team player?

A generative orientation suggests different questions. Does this person surface strengths in the system? Do they ask questions that shift

conversations toward possibility? Do they contribute to co-designing solutions rather than waiting for direction? Do they build the quality of connection on their teams? These are observable, developable behaviors, and they could be incorporated into performance conversations, 360-degree assessments, and team development processes. Recognizing and naming generative followership in organizational assessment practices would also help legitimize the concept for people who have never thought of followership as something worth developing.

Why Change Sticks

Sustainability is one of the persistent challenges in OD work. Many change interventions produce short-term gains that fade once the consultant leaves or the leader's attention shifts to the next priority. Appreciative followership provides a relational and developmental explanation for how some changes become sustained.

When followers are involved as co-creators of a change process, they are not merely implementing someone else's plan; they are helping enact a plan they helped create. They have ownership, understanding, and commitment that runs deeper than compliance with a new directive. When the change process also develops the generative capacity of those involved, the organization gains something that outlasts any single initiative: a population of people who know how to inquire, co-design, and build together. This is the sustainability dividend of appreciative followership, and it may be the most practical reason for OD practitioners to take this framework seriously.

Conclusion

Followership Worth Claiming

For decades, followership scholarship has worked to establish that followers matter. This paper has asked a different question: what can followership generate? We argue that when followers act from a generative orientation, they can set in motion a process of reciprocal flourishing—one that develops leaders and followers alike, while helping to regenerate the organizational systems they share. This is followership not merely to be acknowledged but worth claiming.

Our proposed framework and illustrative case study begin to open this territory, yet much remains to be explored. The concept of reciprocal flourishing needs empirical investigation across organizational contexts, industries, and cultures. The relationship between appreciative followership and other followership constructs, including Kelley's exemplary followership, Chaleff's courageous followership, and Carsten and Uhl-Bien's co-production orientations, deserves further theoretical and empirical work. The generative orientation as a developable capacity needs longitudinal research that tracks its development and its effects over time. Future work might also explore the specific capacities that underlie generative co-creation, including the roles of empowerment, reframing, appreciative knowledge sharing (Thatchenkery, 2005), regenerative circular economy (Thatchenkery & Lehtimaki, in press), and resilience in sustaining the generative orientation over time.

The question we leave with the field is straightforward: what else becomes possible when we take followership seriously as a source of flourishing?

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