Hindering appreciative intelligence® and follower sensemaking through hostile leadership

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Abstract: Stress is on the rise within the workplace. Demands for improved and faster service, more options and increased competition are pushing leadership and followers to give more and be more. In the midst of this, there may be a toxic environment that is hindering leadership and followers. Toxic leaders who facilitate a hostile workplace may be hindering follower’s abilities to make sense of the stress and to reframe situations. This research considers a construct called appreciative intelligence® or AQ. AQ is a mindset that causes a person to see the negative situation but then find a positive outcome through re framing (Thatchenkery and Metzker, 2006). However, research is showing that hostile leadership may hinder a person’s ability to do so thus causing people to stop looking for the positive outcomes. This research considers the detriment of a toxic leader who creates a hostile work environment and removes follower’s abilities to healthy sensemaking and appreciative intelligence®.

Keywords: appreciative intelligence; sensemaking; toxic leadership; hostile work environment.


Biographical notes: Tamera R. Enalls-Fenner obtained her Doctor of Management from Colorado Technical University in Colorado Springs, USA in March of 2015. While a student, she served as a representative at large for the management consulting division with the Academy of Management and also as the Membership Chair for the same division. She presented her dissertation at the AOM in Canada in August 2015. She then travelled to India in December 2015 to present her expounded work at the Birla Institute of Management Technology where her work was published once again. She is a Senior Consultant with Transformation Consulting Agency located in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, USA. Her research focus is appreciative intelligence, toxic work environments and stress within the workplace.

This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled ‘Exploring hostile work environments and the limitations that leaders face when utilizing appreciative intelligence’ presented at Birla Institute of Management Technology, Greater Noida, India, 5 December 2015.
1 Introduction

As a researcher I set out to find the answers to small business stress in relation to the possible utilisation of a construct called appreciative intelligence® (AQ). I asked the question “what AQ leadership competencies do small business leaders need to address workplace stress?” (Enalls-Fenner, 2015b). My research was completed with face-to-face open-ended questions. The study was important because at the time there was no prior research regarding AQ and small business stress thus there was a gap in research.

I was prepared to hear any story the participant wanted to tell and I was fortunate to hear many courageous stories of people setting out to fulfil personal dreams, overcoming impossibilities in achieving personal success. The stories they told were of customers who were unreasonable and threatening, staff that was unhappy and troublesome, and board members who just didn’t seem to have as big of a dream as the participant to a sniper desiring to wreak havoc at an event. Each story was told with enthusiasm, vibrancy, and satisfaction.

The participants shared the benefits of teamwork, personal uses of their faith and a deep need to personally relate to leadership, followers and customers. With that, it was interesting to hear of followers desires to please customers through exceptional customer service and education in relation to products and services. Risk taking was freely practiced and appeared to be a necessary aspect in meeting personal goals as well as team goals. AQ leadership was found to play a significant role in the stories of the participants. However, the mood and stories were drastically different within a perceived hostile work environment and so were the outcomes.

It’s important to note here that some of the stories told in relation to hostile work environments still ended with success. In those situations, leadership was telling the stories. As long as leadership had the trust and faith of their administrative boards or of owners of the business the hostile work environments created by followers seemed to be troubling, certainly bothersome and perhaps emotionally draining, however, success was still achievable. In prior research “Exploring hostile work environments and the limitations that leaders face when utilising AQ” (Enalls-Fenner, 2015a). I found that the hostile work environment did in fact limit leadership and caused a possible slowing of growth but the ability to achieve success was still an option. The hostility from the followers did not stop the AQ leader from reframing the situation and finding a positive ending due to leadership having AQ leadership. Leadership faced limitations owing to hostile followers and a slowdown in production; however, they could still overcome. However, what I found to be most notable was the opposite outcome when leadership was perceived as hostile by the followers.

When followers discussed their perceived hostile work environments the stories were chaotic and convoluted in nature. Some of the participants were emotional showing signs of anger, frustration and pain. The responses were at times confrontational and most interviews ended with a sense of overwhelming hopelessness as they struggled to find ways to make some type of sense of the why’s of the situation. Some were humiliated and shared feelings of betrayal. Where team unity was mentioned it appeared to be most useful in the form of manipulation and passive aggressive behaviours. Participants acknowledged within the interview process that their team was either used to get even with other staff members or for the purpose of fighting against leadership; power in numbers.
The contrast in responses from followers who worked for or with leaders with an AQ mindset was so dramatic I felt it necessary to expound upon what I witnessed. I perceived from the data analysis that even though followers within hostile work environments could relate to the concept of AQ they were incapable of putting it into practice because of the hostile environment. From that data, I found that followers within hostile work environments did not have the ability to make sense of their situations nor did they have the opportunity for successful recovery. This finding is a gap in research. Previous research regarding AQ leaders and the AQ mindset regarding hostile work environments and sensemaking have not been researched thus this research adds to the body of knowledge and is worthy of consideration. This research is in relation to that finding. The research question posed here “is appreciative intelligence and follower sensemaking hindered within hostile work environments?” The participant responses are from prior research from “Exploring appreciative intelligence® competencies for small business leadership during stressful situations” (Enalls-Fenner, 2015b).

2 Literature review

Workplace stress is on the rise in the 21st century with ‘80% of workers’ (American Institute of Stress, 2013), stating they are stressed on the job. As workloads increase and demands for quality production rise employees of organisations are carrying the heavy weight. However, they are not carrying it well; as stress rises so do employee absences, increased health issues and overall dissatisfaction with the job (Enalls-Fenner, 2015b); the expense to organisations: nearly 300 billion in lost revenue (American Psychological Association, 2013).

“Increased levels of job stress is assessed by the perception of having little control but lots of demands have been demonstrated to be associated with increased rates of heart attack, hypertension, and other disorders” (American Institute of Stress, 2013).

Health issues are not the only concern; as “employees sense uncontrollability of the circumstances their desire to control the outcome is reduced and ‘generates the expectation that responding is futile’” [Mohanty et al., (2015), p.887]. Therefore, long before the situation is solved followers are losing hope that it can be which, can bring about financial losses for the organisations.

Leadership style is also significant within organisations as followers rely upon leaders and their leadership style for empowerment (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Followers naturally look to leadership, thus influencing the way the group performs (Chou et al., 2013). Lipman-Blumen (2005) suggests that we innately want to believe that we belong and that the work that we are doing leads to positive community effect. However, as stress increases sending staff looking to organisations for answers a perceived hostile work environment may build on the current feeling of uncontrollability leading staff to ‘fail to solve…a problem, even if there is a solution for the problem’, [Mohanty et al., (2015), p.886].

If the goal of organisations is to build more, do more and obtain more the exact opposite is happening within followers when workplace stress is not addressed properly. “Human beings who are exposed to insoluble problems for a long period of time discover that responses and events are unrelated. Learning acquired in this situation impairs future learning and leads to passivity.” [Mohanty et al., (2015), p.885]. This can be detrimental
to the organisation as well as the followers since people gain their identity in the workplace by the effort they put forth within their job (Ruggieri and Abbate, 2013).

2.1 Positive vs. negative leadership

In organisations, a great deal of power is often thought to rest with managers who have supervisory responsibility for others (Farmer and Aguinis, 2005). When organisations allow toxic leadership to create hostile workplace environments the stressful situations and thoughts of potentially overcoming are set aside to survive the toxic leader through self-preservation (Enalls-Fenner, 2015b). “Toxic leaders are those individuals who by dint of their destructive behaviours and dysfunctional personal qualities generate a serious and enduring poisonous effect on the individuals, families, organisations, communities, and even entire societies they lead” [Lipman-Blumen, (2005), p.2]. The cost of toxic leadership may be felt most within service-oriented industries where a leadership style can influence employee satisfaction as well as service delivery (Elshout et al., 2013).

Since most people spend the vast majority of their days within the workplace they also have a need to develop community. However, when the workplace is toxic and leadership is unwilling to allow for the building of deep relationships followers may begin to have “feelings of isolation, loneliness, and alienation may result – which could lead to anxiety or anguish.” [Burroughs and Eby, (1988), p.510]. Within the community, people will naturally begin to mature and grow according to organisation norms. Argyris (2011) argued humans develop along a set stage from infancy to adult, likewise according to organisational norms; a person should be able to grow from infant to adult leading to a place of self-awareness. However, when leadership is seen as toxic or hostile followers may have a more difficult time maturing (Enalls-Fenner, 2015a).

As research in this area continues it would appear that leaders who build a positive atmosphere are more likely to have followers who can address stressful situations successfully, (Enalls-Fenner, 2015a; Frederickson, 2001; Thatchenkery and Metzker, 2006) therefore, followers are predisposed to consider the potential for positive outcomes (Lambert et al., 2012). Frederickson (2001) further argues, “positive emotions broaden the scopes of attention, cognition, and action and that they build physical, intellectual, and social resources” (p.5); thus allowing for generation of creative ideas by the group (Grawitch et al., 2003).

According to Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006), leadership that can demonstrate high levels of appreciation via rewarding positive aspects of a person’s behaviour tends to lead that person to reciprocate by exhibiting the behaviour more often. Positive emotions such as gratitude and appreciation within staff may also lead to a deeper commitment to an individual’s organisation (Youssef and Luthans, 2007). Even in stressful situations when the demands of the job are significant if followers have deeply connected relationships with colleagues, they are able to find enjoyment in their work as well as excel at what they do (Bakker et al., 2010).

Since “positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires…whereas distinct negative emotions…narrow these same repertoires” [Frederickson and Branigan, (2005), p.313]. Positive attitudes within followers lead to staff that is more likely to confront threats to self in a positive fashion (Trope and Pomerantz, 1998; Ren et al., 2010) and more likely to successfully control negative emotion (Frederickson, 2001). The benefit to the organisation may also mean that
Followers are more “likely to participate in more activities to strengthen their relationships with others, compared to those with a less positive mood” [Lin, (2015), p.494].

2.2 Sensemaking

Within organisations that are consumed with stressful situations it is necessary for followers to be able to make sense of their environment and perceive that positive change can occur. This is critical in stressful situations since “sensemaking...is the primary site where meanings materialise that inform and constrain identity and action.” [Weick, (2005), p.409]. “Sensemaking is the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations” [Maitlis and Christianson, (2014), p.57]; where one is able to make sense of the situation by using a “mental framework to facilitate decision-making and action.” [Thiel et al., (2013), p.53]. The process occurs when a person can apply

a) scanning or the ability to gather information

b) interpretation or the development of ways to comprehend the meaning of the information

c) action or the ability to implement decisions based on the first two stages of the process (Thomas et al., 1993).

Sensemaking is a valuable process in addressing various situations when naturally allowed to occur one can take the previously gathered information and process through sensemaking stages to develop an understanding of the current crisis (Thiel et al., 2013), however, when leadership “narrows the scope of strategic inquiry, it stunts the development of a rich understanding of the environment” [Neill et al., (2007), p.739]. Consequently, when followers cannot make sense of chaos and stress within the workplace they will resist any change, especially if they fear that it will threaten their ideologies and behaviours (Inandi et al., 2013) causing followers to look for an escape (Liu et al., 2012; van Hooff and Baas, 2012).

Perceived hostile work environments stifle the follower and when they sense they are trapped in depressions and negative moods (Hershenberg, 2013) they may be unable to perceive causing a slow response time to current issues (Tobert and Moneta, 2013). To the contrary, positive environments and emotion evoke particular responses such as positive affect (Frederickson, 2001), if followers have had experiences that are more positive in nature they tend to believe that their experiences will continue to be positive (Liu et al., 2012). The follower then draws on this positive mindset to self-regulate in times of adversity (Tesser, 2000).

2.3 Appreciative intelligence

Many studies have been completed using various forms of positive organisational behaviours and have certainly been useful in various situations. Most closely related to AQ is appreciative inquiry (AI). AI emphasises identifying and building on strengths, rather than focusing exclusively on weaknesses (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).
Consultants using this theory ask “what’s good here and...build upon every voice within the conversation” (Royal, 2006). This is an excellent concept, however, within stressful workplace situations where toxic leadership is active AI is ineffective as I found in previous research that followers struggle to find the positive potential (Enalls-Fenner, 2015a, 2015b).

Another leadership style that is well known is transformational. Bass et al. (2003) found that transformational leaders use inspirational and intellectual stimulation in order to obtain positive change. However, even Bass et al. (2003) acknowledges that when things become chaotic within an organisation it is necessary to also implement a transactional leadership mindset. Transactional leaders are leaders who consider faults and deviations. Burns (1978) found that transactional leadership would hinder the relationship between leaders and followers. Transactional leaders “are not looking for change but to keep things the same.” [Odumeru and Ogbonna, (2013), p.358]. Hence, within stressful situations where followers are sensing uncontrollability in relation to their work transformational leadership skill set is not enough to address the situation properly.

I suggest, through previous research, that when dealing with stressful situations a fairly new construct AQ may be more likely to have success. AQ is the “ability to perceive the positive inherent generative potential within the present” [Thatchenkery and Metzker, (2006), p.7] or simply the ability to ‘see the mighty oak in the acorn’ [Thatchenkery and Metzker, (2006), p.15]. AQ has been found to be a leadership trait that is naturally used within small business situations to successfully address stressful circumstances that appear to be minor to major in nature (Enalls-Fenner, 2015b).

The very crux of a leader with an AQ trait is their ability to reframe the situation and find a positive ending. An appreciative person is reflective; uses reference points, and has a tendency toward openness to experience (Adler, 2002). Appreciative people are much more likely to give the situation value and thus appreciate what could be (Gurjack, 2012). Adler (2002) suggests that, “people who are more apt to be appreciative will experience a more pleasant affect when looking at negative situations with a benefit finding/benefit reminding mindset” (p. 21) or by reframing. Reframing involves taking a negative perception about a situation and viewing it from a positive standpoint by giving the situation value (Gurjack, 2012; Thatchenkery, 2009).

An AQ leader demonstrates four qualities

a persistence
b confidence that one’s action matter
c tolerance for uncertainty

An AQ leader has the ability to reframe the situation, meaning the situation may not change however the leader has the ability to reframe the situation and recognise that there is a generative positive outcome that may not be easily seen by an untrained eye. That leader then has the ability to take the necessary actions to obtain the desired outcome (Thatchenkery and Metzker, 2006). The process is not forced but is a natural and genuine reaction that includes followers (Thatchenkery, 2011).

Previous research has shown that when followers are in stressful situations they tend to look towards leadership for guidance. The workplace environment becomes a
community of standards and norms where followers grow at a personal level, relational level and within their career. However, within hostile work environments, it appears that this growth is stymied. When followers cannot make sense of their situations they tend to stop seeking answers. The research proposed here is worthy of consideration since AQ leadership styles have never been pondered in regards to sensemaking and hostile work environments. A gap in research has been found thus it is believed that this study adds to the body of knowledge.

3 Method

Owing to AQ only being ten years old in its findings, my research consisted of a qualitative exploratory methodology. The research being conducted was in relation to stressful workplace situations and finding appreciative intelligence competencies when addressing those situations within small business. This research is directly connected to my latest research *Exploring Appreciative Intelligence Competencies for Small Business Leadership During Stressful Situations*.

A most noted concern with qualitative research is the validity of the sample size. This research was completed according to the standards set by grounded theory design; saturation. Meaning, no additional data could be found (Glaser and Strauss, 2012). Thomson (2004) found that most qualitative studies are between ten and 30 interviews. Marshall et al. (2013) suggests that at saturation the motive to continue ends and further explains that to continue beyond that point may risk a deterioration of the information found. Therefore, I began my research with 21 leaders and followers within five small businesses in Sioux Falls, SD, USA.

Each participant was asked to recall a stressful situation that they addressed within their professional careers. There were no limitations put on the participants as far as time of the event or place; only that it occurred within a workplace setting. During the interview process, some of the participants alluded to stressful situations that included perceived hostile work environments. Concerning the 18 participants interviewed eight shared stressful events connected to what they perceived to be a hostile work environment hindering their ability to function fully in an AQ manner. In some circumstances, of the eight mentioned, if they were in leadership positions and contending with toxic followers it appeared that the leaders were more likely to overcome and obtain a successful outcome using an AQ mindset. Followers contending with toxic leadership were unable to reframe, unable to recover as well as unable to employ basic sensemaking.

For validation purposes, I was able to reach concatenation of the research performed by Thatchenkery and Metzker’s (2006) work. Within the research process, I used similar questions used by the authors of AQ. I also looked for as many answers as possible to each question taking notes when applicable and recording each interview to maintain as much of the rich conversations as possible. All interviews were done face-to-face within the various small businesses. This allowed me to witness a natural work environment.

The goal during the arranging of the interviews was to meet with 20 participants however two declined the interview due to various issues. I’ll note that one decline was from a perceived hostile workplace and it was suggested by another co-worker that the
denial was due to the hostile work environment being too difficult to discuss. The other decline was due to timing issues.

4 Results

After data analysis, I was able to find that AQ was necessary in order to address various stressful situations. I also found that previous AQ research completed by Dr. Thatchenkery and Metzker in 2006 was a necessary aspect in addressing stressful situations and I was able to expound upon their competencies. The expanded competencies needed to address stressful workplace situations within small business include:

a openness to team building and team unity

b expressive personal faith

c confidence in what is being said

d capacity to provide strategy and clear directive.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness to team building and unity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expressive personal faith</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in what is being said</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capacity to provide strategy and directive</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Innate desire to serve</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compelled to educate</td>
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<td>Compassion to listen</td>
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<td>Desire for integrity</td>
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Table 1 Frequency of AQ themes to expound current

Of the 18 participants, all agreed that their workplace environment was stressful. Eight shared experiences of a perceived hostile work environment. Four of the eight were executive leadership and four were followers; three of the followers believed there currently workplace was hostile and one believed the environment had changed although the job position itself was the same. Of the 18 participants 14 believed their stressful situations could be addressed positively whether that meant the cause of the stress continued or not they believed things could be addressed with a positive outcome. Four perceived that the stressful situation could not be addressed positively due to the perception that leadership was hostile and unwilling to change with circumstances ranging from consistent disgruntled customers to threats of sniper attack within city limits. Ten of the 18 perceived that due to leadership that allowed or encouraged the AQ leadership trait to flourish followers were energised by the various conflicts caused by the
stress. They spoke of empowerment, risk taking desires and a deep concern for customer satisfaction and a general understanding of various products. Regardless of the stressful situation followers and leaders were determined to reframe and overcome the stress except those followers within the perceived hostile work environment. Results for leadership and followers within AQ environments made the following suggestions in relation to competencies and how to address stressful situations within small business environments.

During the data analysis, I found that those who believed their workplace was AQ or that they themselves were AQ leaders team unity, personal growth, and customer satisfaction were top priorities. Both leaders and followers discussed risk taking, future opportunities and overcoming other stressful situations. Most had plans of how they could address the next greatest issue and were determined to succeed. When asked if reframing the situations was necessary responses were yes.

Table 2  Prominent themes, those who do not perceive their workplace to be hostile

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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQ346</td>
<td>‘They take risks because they are empowered.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQ333</td>
<td>‘Whether we fail or succeed I show gratitude.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQ072</td>
<td>“I show empathy…the customer just wants to be heard.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQ190</td>
<td>“It’s all about serving others…having empathy and saying how can I help…how can I best serve?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQ827</td>
<td>“When they [the customer] are yelling at you… you have to calm down you can’t take that anger and frustration out on the customer…people are always going to be upset but you can’t let that get you down…it will show in everything I do.”</td>
</tr>
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All four of the followers who perceived a hostile workplace spoke of documenting conversations, having an evidence trail in order to defend themselves if necessary. Three of the four spoke of team unity in the sense of protection in numbers. Any conversation regarding customer service was limited to hostile responses that included setting limitations and boundaries. These boundaries included the on-call staff refusing to answer the phone in the evenings if it wasn’t a major emergency. Staff spoke of being exhausted and overwhelmed by the constant onslaught of negative emotion from leadership. When asked if participants were likely to reframe stressful situations participants responded with a sense of helplessness and inability to see a positive outcome. AQ020 stated, ‘why, what’s the point?’

In situations where the followers perceived the workplace to be hostile in nature followers tended to be limited in their capacity to address any other situation.

The conversation of all four followers was directed at the hostile leadership and their inability to make sense of the hostile atmosphere. Team unity was mentioned, however, co-workers were seen as either people who needed to be confronted or people they would conspire with to come against the leader; a team effort.

These followers were rendered incapable of sensemaking within the hostile work environment. Since “successful sensemaking requires the acquisition of information via
causes, constraints, and contingencies to form mental models” (Thiel et al., 2013), which then should lead followers to make decisions and take appropriate action.

Table 3  Prominent Themes, Those who do perceive their workplace to be hostile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Response</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQ020</td>
<td>‘People just stewed nightly…they were hurt and pissed at the injustice.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQ838</td>
<td>‘Unless the client has a fire, flood or blood I’m not answering the call.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQ526</td>
<td>“The whole community could see what was going on it was humiliating…I felt constant anxiety and anticipation…why would we go down this road…what they wanted me to do went against my morals.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQ233</td>
<td>“I’ve only been here six months but I’m learning to make short-cuts on my computer for documentation…I’ve only been yelled at a few times so far…I don’t need constant praise.”</td>
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Consequently, they were unable to address any other stressful situation outside of the hostile leadership. Conversations led to feelings of hopelessness and a need to survive versus risk taking and overcoming. In one situation the dysfunctional leadership had been removed through a firing and yet the follower was still only able to focus attention on the hopelessness and deep inner connection to the feelings of humiliation and an inability to control any of the outcomes. The participant became emotional during the interview process and spoke of forgiveness issues and struggling to rebuild community relations.

The three participants who perceived their current workplace and leadership was hostile were emotionally distraught, highly confrontational in manner, and incapable of processing a positive statement or comment. It appeared at times during the interview process that the participants were having difficulty expressing or processing their anger and frustration. One participant discussed a desire for justice and truth. Although they were aware of their right to forfeit the interview at any time each deemed that it was necessary for them to discuss their current workplace situation. There was a common thread of thinking that in telling the researcher the problems leadership would change; however, they were informed several times that their answers would be never be discussed with leadership.

4.1 Leadership and hostile environments

The eight participants who spoke of hostile work environments four were in leadership positions: three were executive leaders and one was middle management. All four leaders readily connected with their ability to remain within the AQ leadership trait although the followers were clearly negative in their attitudes. Even with one leader discussing a hostile staff that led the participant to ‘let go’ almost everyone on staff it was still considered successful due to the outcome. According to participant responses each leader credited this success to AQ Boards or owners who believed in their leadership abilities and the goals that had been put in place. Leadership response acknowledged the hostile work environment, the stressful situation and the odds of overcoming but there was also a sense of hope that something good could happen.
Table 4  Prominent Themes, Leadership who perceived a hostile work environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQ293</td>
<td>“I had to fire 75% of the staff because they were poison and counterproductive…I never could have done it without owner trust…they believed in me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQ346</td>
<td>“Resilience starts at the top and works its way down…we take risks because of empowerment.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQ826</td>
<td>“I had to brainstorm and think outside of the box…we’d never been up against something like this before and our previous systems were failing…I don’t know if I’m an AQ leader but I knew I had to do something…my leadership looked to me.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQ114</td>
<td>“They no longer understood the purpose or the plan and they couldn’t see how it could happen…there came a time when (sigh) I was going to give up…but I knew if I stayed positive and motivated that would come across to the others…I needed to look for others who were on board and standing with me…I found the right person within corporate headquarters and that was all I needed to move forward.”</td>
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5 Discussion

I asked, “is appreciative intelligence and follower sensemaking hindered within hostile work environments?” “Sensemaking is a process that people work to understand issues or events.” [Maitlis and Christianson, (2014), p.57] By gathering information, interpreting ways to comprehend the information and then implementing a plan (Thomas et al., 1993); thus allowing for an understanding of the current crisis (Thiel et al., 2013). Participants from this study who perceived their leadership facilitated a hostile workplace environment appeared to be unable to make sense of the situation. This tends to agree with the notion that the leadership restricted the capacity for inquiry and may have shut down the development of a clear understanding of the stressful situation (Neill, McKee, and Rose, 2007). It appeared in this situation that the leadership was hostile to such an extent that followers were unable to see or comprehend anything other than the leader and the hostile environment.

Therefore, if there were any other stressful situations or opportunities that could have occurred through successfully addressing those circumstances it was completely ignored due to the distress caused by the leader and the environment. This also led to followers that were indifferent to customer needs and customer concerns. Followers were also apathetic to building true team unity or even viable community internally. They also could not comprehend any opportunity to take risks, set goals or achieve personal growth.

Competencies associated with AQ as per Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006) include a persistence to overcome and a confidence that your actions matter as well as an ability to tolerate uncertainty with an irrepressible resilience to achieve a positive ending. I expounded upon these by finding that in order for small business to address stressful situations using an AQ mindset leaders and followers need to have the ability to be open to team building and team unity, the freedom for expression of their personal faith, and the confidence that what is being said by leadership was accurate and achievable as well
as the ability to work within the constraints of the strategies and directives (Enalls-Fenner, 2015a).

Since AQ is the “ability to perceive the positive inherent generative potential within the present” [Thatchenkery and Metzker, (2006), p.7). People who have an AQ mindset are willing to consider a negative situation and reframe the situation in order to find a potential positive outcome thus leading to action. The data within this research indicated that even though followers did agree that AQ was a viable method of addressing stressful situations they couldn’t conceive how to implement it within their hostile work environment and instead looked for ways to survive.

Followers also agreed with the competencies of Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006) research and also mentioned similar competencies that were then used in my data analysis results. However, with that said, they readily admitted that they unable to comprehend how AQ could be implemented within their workplace situations. Attention in hostile work environments by followers was given to survival, documentation of events, and getting away by disconnecting from the situation emotionally or physically hiding in offices. Their emotional state was not that of excitement but anger, frustration, distrust, and pain. They were confrontational in responses to the interview questions; questioning each question and appeared overly protective of themselves and their personal viewpoints.

In direct contrast, when executive leadership discussed hostile work environments directly related to negative followers the opposite was true. As found in prior research, a leaders utilisation of an AQ mindset was limited in scope (Enalls-Fenner, 2015a) however, as long as leaders had the trust and faith of their overseers such as an overseeing board of directors or ownership successful endings were possible and in all cases within this study were achieved.

6 Future research

In order to better expound upon these findings, one could consider what occurs to AQ leadership that is overseen by a perceived hostile overseeing board or ownership. It is also recommended that more data be collected regarding followers who perceive their environment to be hostile and then have a healthy change in leadership. Since only one of the participants who perceived their workplace to be hostile and then had a change in leadership was interviewed for this study there may be varying results. It is also recommended to consider larger organisations and the dynamics within those settings in relation to AQ and hostile environments since this research was solely based on small business organisations.

7 Conclusions

In conclusion, it is believed that since AQ within hostile work environments and sensemaking has not previously been researched a gap in knowledge has been found. It is also believed that this study adds to the body of knowledge. The data from this research shows there is a direct connection that hinders a follower’s ability to implement an AQ mindset in order to address stressful workplace situations as well as the inability to make sense of situations within a perceived hostile work environment. There is also a small
argument that can be made that even when leadership is removed and new leadership is put in place followers emotional well-being has incurred damage which may require a trust building process allowed by the new leadership.

The research also found that if an AQ mindset exists within leadership and a negative attitude exists within followers the leadership is hindered by the hostile environment (Enalls-Fenner, 2015a). However, if the AQ leadership has AQ administrators the limitations caused by follower negativity may slow the process causing some hindrances but it does not necessarily mean a forced end to forward moving progress. Within this research, it appeared that when leadership was perceived as hostile followers who may have been AQ in mindset were always hindered and forward progress was not achieved.

Thus, it is concluded that a perceived hostile work environment caused by leadership will eventually negatively affect follower’s production, growth, community building and customer care. Previous research would indicate this may lead to more stress incurred by staff and a negative effect on the organisations bottom line. It is highly recommended by the results of this data analysis that organisations be aware of the company environment and make necessary changes that would lead to a positive atmosphere. Therefore, allowing leaders and followers the natural ability to flow in an AQ mindset as well as allowing leadership and followers the ability to make sense of situations and maintain a healthy recovery.

References


