

Leading With Appreciation

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Our Experience

Learning to shift from blame, criticism and entitlement to a genuine sense of appreciation wasn't easy for us. Our habits of blame and entitlement were well engrained. Marlene's default approach when she was unhappy or uncomfortable was to look for something or someone to blame. This could just as easily be herself as others. Her inner critic was very strong and vocal.

Bob was more subtle about his blaming, often not voicing his criticisms directly. Subtle or overt, the habit of blame and criticism became toxic to us. It poisoned our relationship and we didn't look forward to being with each other. We commonly used phrases like "you always" and "you never" and "when will you learn?"

As is the case in many relationships, our blame was fuelled by our sense of entitlement: Marlene felt she deserved or had a right to Bob's money, time, love, attention, and more. Over the past few years Marlene has shifted to seeing Bob with new eyes – the eyes of appreciation. And as she has done this, it seems to her that she has more money, time, love and attention. What we focus on grows.

Bob felt, as many males do, that he was entitled to more sex. This is a common theme among the couples we see. It is not always the male; sometimes it is the female partner who is demanding more sex, and the same theme exists among same-sex couples.

Entitlement never gets people what they want. It only creates pressure and resistance. Bob has shifted from his focus on not getting enough love and affection, to viewing the love and affection between us as a gift. And again, there is more love and affection every day. When we drop our expectations and demands, it is easier for our partners to respond.

The Experience of Others

In our two-on-two sessions with couples, we challenge partners to begin each day by saying at least one "I appreciate myself for..." and at least one "I appreciate you for..." Believe it or not, most people find that difficult to do.

Here are some examples of the responses we get.

We are meeting with a couple who have been together 15 years. We will call them Justin and Marika. When we first asked them to lead with appreciation every day, Justin told us that this was artificial and unnatural. We explored with him his discomfort with appreciation. We wanted the language of appreciation to become so natural for both of them that it was what came first when they thought of their partner.

Justin also told us that in his opinion, you only appreciate something that is worth appreciating. He would need evidence of things to appreciate his partner for, and then he could express his appreciation. Justin believed that one has to earn appreciation. As we explored this further, we all realized that Marika always fell just short of earning Justin's appreciation. He failed, on a regular basis, to see anything worth appreciating.

Marika also had difficulty appreciating Justin. She told us that she wasn't seeing us to appreciate Justin: she was seeing us to solve a problem. Problems cannot be solved when one has this sort of energy or perspective. When your focus is on the problems, that's all you can see. We want you to shift your focus so you can see other possibilities.

We coached Justin and Marika to look at situations with new eyes so that they could see that there is always something to appreciate in any given situation.

Gradually, they incorporated appreciation into their daily lives. When we contacted them two years later, they told us that when we first asked them to appreciate each other out loud, they thought we were crazy. But now, they do it regularly, many times a day, and it has made a big difference. They confirmed that they could learn to find things to appreciate even when it seemed like they couldn't, and that shifting to appreciation created more space so they are able to tackle even the most difficult situations. .

What is Appreciation?

Generally, when we ask our clients what it means to appreciate, they respond with definitions such as having gratitude, being thankful for, valuing, cherishing or treasuring someone or something.

While these are all accurate definitions, there are two other meanings of the word that we find very useful and which we'd like to discuss.

The first meaning is **becoming sensitively aware**. Being sensitively aware of something means being aware of something with all of your senses, such as smelling, touching, tasting, listening carefully or with new, more generous ears, and looking at it closely or in new ways. When we are sensitively aware of something, we experience it in depth, in new ways, with a sense of greater space, and with a sense of magic.

The second meaning is **an increase in value**, the way your house (hopefully) appreciates. When we value, are thankful for, prize, cherish or treasure something (i.e. "appreciate" it), it has value in our eyes. Being sensitively aware and appreciating something (or someone) can actually cause an increase in value!

What Prevents Us From Appreciating?

Blame and criticism are two main culprits. Blame and criticism look for the worst in someone or something. Blame and criticism are driven by fear. They are based on the fear that without blame we (or the other person) won't improve, grow, change: the belief

that unless we assign blame, nothing will get better. Our whole society is based on this and we expend a lot of energy to discover who is to blame so we can fix it.

However, blame and criticism never actually cause lasting change, neither in us nor in others. The only way people change is through encouragement, appreciation, love and acceptance.

“We have high goals for ourselves and our loved ones, and we fear that without a constant barrage of criticism and blame we would all languish in mud puddles of sloth” Drs. Gay & Kathlyn Hendricks, Lasting Love, p. 85

Appreciation in Action *or* How Leading With Appreciation Looks

We don't ask our clients to do something that we aren't willing to do ourselves. Even as we were writing this as a team, we felt the energy of blame arising between us, so we generated some appreciation and shifted the energy. Later, when we reviewed our day, we couldn't remember what the blame was about. The issue dissolved once we opened up to appreciation. We still begin each day (and have for six years now) with a spoken self-appreciation and a spoken appreciation for each other.

When you first met, if you are like many couples, you had lots to appreciate about each other. Here's your chance to re-capture *now* that sense of excitement you had about each other *then*.

In case you need some help thinking about things to appreciate, here is a list of ideas to get you started:

- Physical attributes: toes, feet, fingers, hands, nose, ears, eyes, mouth, muscles, skin, hair, lips, arms, legs, knees, breasts, genitals; the shape, size, temperature, strength of the body; don't forget to appreciate the often-left-out parts like the belly, thighs, calves, shoulders, cheeks, heart, lungs and other organs, etc.
- A laugh, a voice, a mind, a smile
- A person's character (willingness, commitment, sensitivity, energy, honesty, generosity, gentleness, courage, integrity)
- The tasks the person does, the skills they have
- The way they create beauty in the world, the way they solve problems
- The way they sing, dance, move, speak, listen, play, communicate, love, walk, run
- What they have learned, what they are exploring
- Their beauty, creativity, aliveness, power, strength, weakness, excitement
- Their sexuality, and spirituality
- Their emotions, and their intuition
- Their unique genius qualities, their talents, what they contribute
- Their thoughts, ideas, dreams, desires, enthusiasm, passion, spontaneity
- The way they say “yes” and the way they say “no”
- Their clothing and the way they dress

Lead from a genuine sense of appreciation and everything you do will increase in value.

We know how shifting to leading from appreciation may be easier said than done.

If you would like learn more about how we can help, please email us at info@marleneandbob.com or call us at 613-594-9248 to arrange a complimentary one-hour coaching session by phone or in person. . If you would like to sign up for our complimentary series “13 Ways to Connect with your Lover” go to www.marleneandbob.com.