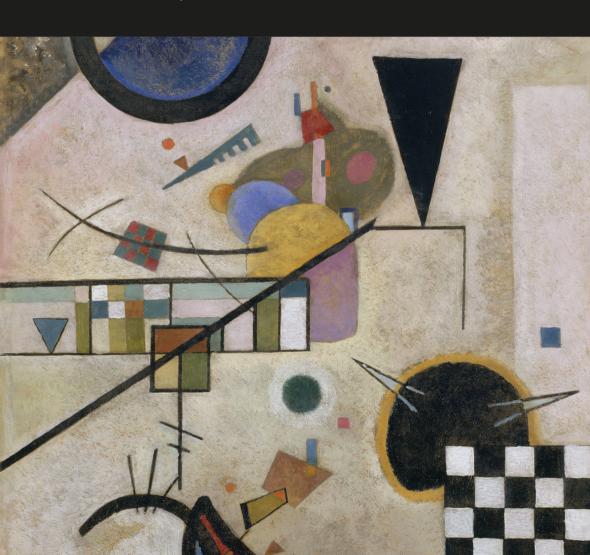# Complexity and Leadership

Edited by
Kiran Chauhan, Emma Crewe and Chris Mowles

"'The future ain't what it used to be' – never was American satirist Yogi Berra's quip as relevant as it is to our current age. A global swirl of change, ranging from the digital revolution through to geopolitics, is invading almost every area of our lives. This volume is an indispensable guide to the dilemmas and possibilities of leadership in the context of these complexities, informed both by theory and practice."

Anthony Giddens, *Member of the House of Lords and Life fellow of King's College, Cambridge, UK*

"I have studied and taught leadership for many years, yet I have growing doubts that what I've learned is up to the challenges we face. I found my experience of reading this book to be both profoundly disruptive and surprisingly freeing to my perspective on leadership. It has brought me a renewed sense of curiosity and hope to my work."

Dan Leahy, *Leadership Development Specialist, Waypoint Leadership Consulting, Kirkland, WA, USA*

"This is a meaningful and timely inquiry about the ways in which we engage with the concept of leadership. The authors lean into the tensions of traditional leadership education with a lens towards the social and collective agreements that are leadership in practice. An interesting exploration of leadership when context, complexities and relational constructs are essential to the experience."

Erica Montemayor, *Associate Director, The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, PA, USA*

"The picture of contemporary leadership is complex, and this volume wonderfully captures this complexity providing valuable insights into the practice of leading people in organizations. The contributors to this book avoid simple recipes and platitudes about leadership, and instead they question the myth of truly harmonious relations between organizational actors. A really engaging bottom-up and participatory approach to research."

Sabina Siebert, *Professor of Management, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, UK*

"If you feel disappointed by literature that idealizes leadership, and if you cannot entirely recognize your own experiences in literature that takes a critical stance towards the very idea of leadership, this book might become an important read for you … By reflecting on the processes of relating they are part of, and by reflecting

a diversity of research literature, the authors offer nuanced reflections on the political nature of leadership, with a recognition of own intentions and engagement. As a result, leadership stands out as neither demonized nor idealized but described from within, yet with the critical distance the reflexivity has enabled."

Henry Larsen, *Associate Professor, Department of Entrepreneurship and Relationship Management, University of Southern Denmark*

COMPLEXITY AND LEADERSHIP

Leading organisations in our contemporary world means grappling with unpredictability, painful pressures and continual conflict, all in the context of an acceleration in the pace of change. We expect the impossible from heroic leaders and they rarely live up to expectations. With countless recommendations, self-help books and new concepts, scholars and management consultants often simplify and dream unrealistically. This book challenges the more orthodox discourse on leadership and presents a way of thinking about leadership that pays closer attention to experience.

The contributors in this book, all senior managers or facilitators of leadership development, resist easy solutions, new typologies or unrealistic prescriptions. Writing about their experiences in Denmark, the UK, Israel, Ethiopia, South Africa and beyond, they are less concerned with traits that people can possess and learn, or magical promises of recipes for success, and more with the socio-political process of the interaction between people from which leadership emerges as a theme. We focus on understanding leadership as a practice within which communication, research, imagination and ethical judgements are continuously improvised. So rather than idealising leadership, or reducing it to soothing tools and techniques, we suggest how leaders might become more politically, emotionally and socially savvy.

This book is written for academics and practitioners with an interest in the everyday challenges of both individual and group practices of formal and informal leaders in different types of organisations, and is an ideal resource for executives and students on leadership development programmes. We hope this volume will help readers to expand the wisdom found in their own experience and discover for themselves and for others, a greater sense of freedom.

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COMPLEXITY AND MANAGEMENT

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COMPLEXITY AND LEADERSHIP

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*Edited by Kiran Chauhan,
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PREFACE TO THE COMPLEXITY AND MANAGEMENT SERIES

THE KEY IDEAS OF COMPLEX RESPONSIVE PROCESSES OF RELATING AND THEIR RECENT DEVELOPMENT

Chris Mowles

Our experience at work tells us that we make plans but they rarely turn out as we intended. We communicate as clearly as we can, but we are still often misunderstood. Even when acting with the best of intentions we can cause harm. Sometimes leaders and managers become brutally aware that they may be in charge, but they are not always in control because work life has the quality of being predictably unpredictable. Management training and education have become much more widespread since the 1990s yet still largely rely on assumptions of predictability and control. Often dealing with abstractions and idealisations, the majority of management discourse rests on assumptions of an orderly world where leaders and managers propose and dispose using tools and techniques of technical rationality (Stacey, 2012).

The minority disciplines within the natural sciences, the sciences of complexity, have been an alternative source domain for thinking differently about

the stable instability of organisational life for more than 30 years. Even so, management as a tradition finds it hard to shake off old habits. Just as it is now widely accepted that organisations are sites of complex activity, so there are tendencies within organisational scholarship that assume that even complexity can be managed, putting the manager back in control. For example, it may be assumed that the manager can decide whether a situation is simple, complicated or complex, thus determining whether a 'complexity approach' is needed or not. Alternatively, it may be suggested that a manager can 'unleash/ embrace/encourage' complexity, as though complexity is always good and is at the manager's command, thus reinstating managerial control.

Uniquely, then, the books, articles and teaching which have emerged from the faculty group at the University of Hertfordshire (UH), and graduates of the Doctor of Management (DMan) programme there, have taken up insights from the complexity sciences, but have tried at the same time to cleave to their radical implications. It has been a decades-long experiment working with the idea that ultimately the social world is uncontrollable, but that we need to find ways to go on together anyway. This is not the same as saying that there is nothing to be done. Rather, the perspective developed at UH, termed 'complex responsive processes of relating', takes management seriously as a contingent group activity that requires highly reflective and reflexive individuals to negotiate and improvise, particularly in situations of high uncertainty. It assumes that some ways of managing are more helpful than others, and that with practice, it is possible to become more skilful.

Between 2000 and 2008 Routledge produced a series of volumes, both single author and curated books of chapters written by faculty and graduates from the DMan programme, which set out this perspective. The foundational volume was the jointly authored book by Ralph Stacey, Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw entitled: *Complexity and Management: Fad or Radical Challenge to Systems Thinking* (2000). In it the authors interpreted the complexity sciences by analogy, and drew on the social sciences to locate it as a resource for social science thinking and research. It marked a radical departure for organisational theory, and was a pioneering attempt to mobilise complexity theory to understand organisational life. The subsequent series of edited volumes was entitled: *Complexity and the Experience of Organizing* and comprised titles on research, managing and leading in the public sector, emergence, improvisation, values and leadership (Stacey (2005); Stacey and Griffin (2005a);

Stacey and Griffin (2005b); Stacey and Griffin (2008); Shaw and Stacey (2006)). These volumes, evolved out of the research work undertaken by students on the DMan, which had become an experiential doctorate run along psychodynamic lines. The volumes had wide appeal and demonstrated the importance of taking everyday complex experience seriously, inquiring into it as a participant rather than from an assumed independent position.

This current series reimagines the experience of 15 years ago with the programme under the directorship of Chris Mowles and faculty colleagues, Nick Sarra, Karen Norman, Emma Crewe, Karina Solsø and Kiran Chauhan. To date, more than 70 DMan students have successfully completed their doctorates. Over recent years the graduates in the programme have drawn on an ever-widening variety of scholars and ideas to illuminate their work, including anthropology, social psychology, political economy, feminism, intersectionality and critical organisational theory. The faculty also continues to develop the perspective of complex responsive processes (Mowles, 2021).

In these co-edited volumes (Leadership, Consultancy and Management in the public sector), the first in a new series, a group of vibrant, engaged researchers inquire into complex phenomena at work, and write about the insights they have gained as a way of provoking resonance, recognition and insight in the reader. This is very different from more orthodox entity-based research which is more typical in business schools, or research which is undertaken to increase the effectiveness or efficiency of organisations, or to test some tool or technique of management. Rather, the research in this volume is driven by doubt and curiosity to draw out the plurality of everyday interactions in organisations. Aimed at producing complex knowledge, it is governed simply by paying attention to what is going on, and what sense people are making of it, including the researcher. The generalisability of the findings, their usefulness if you like, is to be found in the extent to which the reader finds this resonant, provoking, insightful and wise. There are no tools, techniques of stepwise methods to be found here.

Readers of the original Routledge series may be interested in comparing and contrasting methods and references from the previous publications to judge how thinking has changed. But first it is worth going back over some of the original scholarship which shaped the thinking of the founding of the DMan and the perspective it embodied, which I do briefly now as a way

of providing some context for the chapters which follow. This review does not do justice to the wide variety of sources which students and graduates now draw on for their research, but it may help frame the key tenets of thinking which pervade the chapters in this volume.

Theoretical and practical origins

At the beginning of the millennium three colleagues at the UH, Ralph Stacey, Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw, decided to start a new professional doctorate. The trio's aim was to combine all that was productive, if sometimes uncomfortable, from their shared experience of group-based pedagogy with an interdisciplinary research perspective combining the natural and social sciences. This perspective was forged in a very close friendship between the three colleagues, a fact consonant with the perspective they were developing, and which highlights the centrality of relationships to understanding social life.

Starting the DMan also marked a theoretical break from Stacey's previous oeuvre and fascination with the complexity sciences. Stacey had been working with researchers in groups for some time, but in his previous publications he had argued that organisations were complex adaptive systems (CAS), or that they were like them, using the complexity sciences as metaphor. CAS are computer-based models comprising multiple interacting agents. He even argued that complexity thinking applied in certain situations and not others, the subject of the still ubiquitous Stacey diagram.[1] After many heated hours of discussion Stacey, Griffin and Shaw moved from simple metaphor to interpret the CAS by analogy, identifying properties of interest in the models and refracting them to the social domain. In doing so they tried to hang on to the generative tension of keeping an in-depth understanding of CAS to set alongside a granular interpretation of relevant social theory, and argued that complexity applies in all situations and at all degrees of scale.

I explore what the two domains share in common, and what the conceptual implications are later. But the combined perspective these colleagues developed, complex responsive processes of relating, is an example of what the French philosopher Edgar Morin (2005) later expressed as a necessary development in dealing with insights from the complexity sciences. Morin argued that there needed to be a transition from a restricted understanding

of complexity to a general understanding. He set out to encourage new ways of thinking that brought the natural and social sciences together. For him there was further to go than simply collapsing some of the radical implications of taking the complexity sciences seriously into orthodox natural science thinking based on disaggregation, prediction and control:

> The principle of disjunction, of separation (between objects, between disciplines, between notions, between subject and object of knowledge), should be substituted by a principle that maintains the distinction, but that tries to establish the relation.
>
> (Morin (2005: 7))

The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating is an attempt at describing such a new paradigm of thinking, researching and acting which privileges relationships, process and collaboration, uniting the knower and the known in paradoxical tension.

The body of ideas originally wove together four principal traditions of thought: the complexity sciences, in particular evolutionary CAS; pragmatic philosophy; process sociology, especially Norbert Elias, and group analytic thinking and practice. I briefly explore these four influences sequentially. The purpose of the following paragraphs is to point to some of the key assumptions which inform the work of authors contributing to this volume, so that the reader might better locate their arguments.

Complexity – radically different assumptions about stability and change

More orthodox theories of management often contain assumptions about social life drawing on systems theory, which depend upon spatial metaphors, notions of equilibrium, and consider organisations as entities. Organisations are described as operating at different 'levels', are disaggregated into parts and whole, and go through distinct and managed processes of change. There is an assumption that managers are somehow outside the organisation understood as a system and can therefore operate upon it. As an example, in everyday ways of talking about organisations managers are thought to be able to 'move it in the right direction', to 'create the right culture', and to 'drive change'. These assumptions hide in plain sight: they are

taken for granted and are therefore often not alluded to or justified, because they are dominant assumptions. This is the way that ideology works. When I present complexity ideas to groups of managers, they often rightly ask me to work hard to justify them, often without acknowledging that their own ideas about stability and change in organisations are informed by a set of assumptions which are equally questionable.

The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating interprets CAS in particular as having profound implications for thinking about stability and change in social life. For example, first, CAS models are never at rest, but iterate, then reiterate. The implication by analogy is that this is equally true for social life. Assuming this problematises more orthodox theories of management which propose that organisations have to undergo periods of change from an undesired stable state to an ideal stable state; stability is contrasted with change. Instead, to corrupt Churchill's observation about history, from a complexity perspective we might think that organising is simply one damned thing after another. Even states of stability are dynamically maintained.

Second, in CAS population-wide patterns of stable instability arise as a result of what all agents are doing together in their local interactions, and may change as a result of the amplification of small differences. Cause and effect are in a non-linear relationship. Interpreting this characteristic by analogy challenges thinking about wholesale, often top-down change predicated on linear cause and effect. To transpose this insight to organisations, is to assume that whatever happens does so as a combination of managerial framing and employee interpretation in local interactions, which in turn feeds managerial framing. As an example, and to give a complexity perspective on why wholesale organisational change programmes often fail, what everyone is doing together in their local interactions may be precisely to resist the proposed change.

Third, in CAS, agents negotiate conflicting constraints in their local interactions. By analogy this directs us to think about how people in organisations negotiate their mutual constraints, their power relationships at work. Power and politics are often avoided in contemporary organisations and orthodox organisational scholarship, and when they are we avoid the ethical implications of the negotiation of how to go on together. Fourth in CAS there is no controlling agent or group of agents which direct activity. Interpreting this characteristic by analogy deflates the common assumption that individual leadership is everything. Thinking about general patterns of

influence is not the same as denying the importance of leaders, but rather broadens our thinking to consider the exercise of authority as an improvisational group activity.

And lastly, CAS have a paradoxical movement: local interaction creates the global pattern, while at the same time the global pattern shapes local activity. In organisational life we can only take up idealisations of global patterns, call them strategies, in local activity. At the same time, our local improvisations produce what we might think of as strategy in practice. In everyday management thinking, contradictions are resolved by splitting them out with the manager able to choose one pole over the other, leaders or followers, transformation or transaction, strategy or implementation. Interpreting insights from the complexity sciences from a complex responsive process perspective implies that there is no splitting and no choosing, and so no escaping the paradox.

Evolutionary CAS interpreted by analogy do offer a different source domain for thinking about what's going on when we're at work trying to get things done with other people. But they only take us so far, and are, after all, models which run on computers. In order to develop a more subtle, durable suite of ideas, in a move from a restricted to a general understanding of complexity, complex responsive processes draws on three additional strands of thinking from the social sciences/humanities. In doing so it sketches out a more comprehensive theory of mind, of action, of identity, of communication, of ethics and of the paradox of stability and change.

Pragmatic philosophy

Complex responsive processes of relating is infused with pragmatic thinking. Pragmatic philosophy, particularly the works of G.H. Mead (1932, 1934) and John Dewey (1929, 1946; Dewey and Bentley, 1949) directs us to consider the importance of everyday experience. We mobilise our human capacity for doubt, the ability to reflect on what we are doing. If, as the CAS suggest, global patterns arise simply and only from what we are all doing together acting locally, then the pragmatists' preoccupation with experience, which turns on the exploration of what we are doing together, and what sense we make of it, is a useful perspective. Rather than proceeding from abstract ideas, from the idea of systems, pragmatism is

concerned with what people are saying and doing in the co-construction of their social worlds. Both Mead and Dewey assume a thoroughly social self, that the body is in the social world and the social world is in the body. We are formed by the social world, just as we form it, the same dynamic of forming and being formed that I drew attention to in CAS.

The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating draws on Mead's complex theory of communication, that in order to understand each other we communicate in shared significant symbols. Equally, the perspective borrows his idea about the predictable unpredictability of conversation, that meaning arises in our gestures towards one another taken together with the responses these provoke, both in ourselves and in others. We may start out by knowing what it is we want to say, but change our minds as we hear ourselves speaking, and as we notice and respond to our interlocutors. Consonant with Morin's suggestion that we consider the subject and object of knowledge in relation, so pragmatism works to overcome dualisms, self and other, I, me and we, and reframes them as paradoxes. Both Dewey and Mead were concerned with an emergent theory of ethics which addresses the competing goods in any dynamic situation.

Process sociology

The main sociological informant of the original statement of complex responsive processes of relating is Norbert Elias (1978, 2000, 2001) who also considers the 'I' and 'we' element of our personality structures to be two sides of the same coin. For Elias the relatively contemporary idea that we are discrete, autonomous individuals cut off from one another is an illusion which doesn't serve us well. Instead, we are highly interdependent, social selves with no 'inside' and no 'outside', just as there is no outside of social life from which we gain a privileged view. Elias frames the structure/agency discussion at the heart of sociology as a paradox: society is made up of highly social individuals who together create the habitus, the dynamic recognisable patterns of behaviour which we shape and which shape us. Our place in the social network we are born into, and the groups we belong to produces our sense of self: paradoxically it individualises us. I argue that this is a shared assumption between Mead, Dewey and Elias, and is consonant with the interpretation I made from CAS previously.

Though Elias developed his oeuvre long before there were computers, he develops similar insights about society that I drew by interpretation from CAS. Elias is preoccupied by the fact that language and thinking represent entities at rest much better than they do relationships in motion. Instead, he uses the analogy of the game both to understand the constant change in social life and to frame the role of power and reflective detachment in gaining social advantage. We are interdependent and have need of one another: the greater the need, the greater the power disadvantage. But so, too, greater power accrues to those who are able to notice their own participation in the game of social life. This, too, is resonant with the value that Dewey in particular attributes to our human capacity for reflection and thought in the deepening of experience.

Group analytic theory

S.H. Foulkes, the founder of group analytic theory and practice (1964; Foulkes and Anthony, 1957) had a troubled friendship with his fellow German Jewish refugee, Nobert Elias. Both were concerned with inherent sociality of human beings, and shared the insight that we could act more wisely if we gained insight into group dynamics, and our own participation in them. For Foulkes the best way to find out about a group was to participate in a group, so he developed a method of running agenda-less, free-flowing inquiry in groups, where the principal task is to talk about what is going on. This brings to mind the focus of the pragmatists and their interest in what it is we are doing together and how we come to think and talk about it. In the course of inquiry, a variety of perspectives emerge: there is no need for consensus, and no need to take action, except the action of noticing and reflecting. The point is to be together with no particular end in view and to pay attention to relationships. Foulkes called this the development of 'group mindedness', which we might understand as a form of decentring of the self, or reflexivity.

Experiential groups run in the tradition of Foulkesian thinking are at the heart of the method adopted by the DMan, and every graduate of the programme will have experienced a minimum of 36 group meetings lasting 90 minutes, run without anyone in charge, and without a task except to talk about what the participants have on their minds.

Summary – key ideas which inform the chapters in this volume

All four strands of intellectual tradition which inform the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating privilege history, sociality, and paradox. The social theory which underpins the insights from the complexity sciences weave together the traditions of Aristotle, Hegel and Darwin to focus on the processual and evolutionary qualities of social life.

All the chapters in this volume borrow from and develop the founding ideas of complex responsive processes and borrow from the intellectual traditions outlined earlier. They also supplement and deepen them with their own reading. In doing so they take what is considered a micro-social approach to researching organisations and depend upon narrative and interpretation. The focus on everyday interaction arises from the key insight informing the perspective of complex responsive processes that whatever happens does so as a result of what everyone is doing together. As a set of intellectual assumptions, complex responsive processes is concerned with the structured flux of relationships, power, practical judgement and ethics. It is concerned with complexifying our thinking about the social world, but nonetheless with drawing distinctions, to generalise, to call out resonance and to provoke.

To be clear that there are no easy answers in working out how to go on together is not the same as giving up and claiming that there is nothing to be done. Rather, the emphasis in the chapters in this volume is to make sense of what the researchers have been doing in the hope of acting more wisely in future, and on producing complex and plural ways of thinking more helpful in navigating uncertain times.

Note

1 Stacey abandoned the diagram when he accepted that complexity wasn't a special condition that applied in certain circumstances, but is a quality of all human relating. Additionally, he was concerned that such diagrams, which are ubiquitous in business schools, give false reassurance that managers are still in control.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1

INTRODUCTION

Kiran Chauhan and Emma Crewe[1]

A crisis in leadership and in understanding it

Few doubt the significant impact of leaders on the prospects of an organisation, industry or nation. We expect the impossible from leaders and they rarely live up to expectations. And leading has become more challenging as the world becomes more unpredictable. Our world is more complex as globalisation connects us all, change is accelerating, as the sociologist Rosa points out (2019), and leadership has become more demanding with the result that the perceived failure, fear of and disdain towards leaders appear to be on the increase, or at least more openly expressed. The call for new and more effective leadership in organisations has become increasingly acute in recent decades as workplaces become less homogenous in terms of employees' needs, wants and expectations in their working lives. Add to this the multiple emergencies facing the globe – climate change, pressure on public services, inequality, financial constraint, mental health and now the legacy of COVID-19 – and it is understandably attractive to think that if only leaders were suitably skilled or knowledgeable, then everything would be more efficient, just and safe. For example, how many of us at the start of the global pandemic in 2020 looked to national leaders to take charge and

tell us what to do, at the same time as knowing that no one really had any idea what the future would hold?

It is hardly surprising that we are awash with literature, self-help books and new concepts on leadership but what is puzzling is that we are no nearer to improved practice. It is our contention that the way we think about leadership is part of the problem. We associate with the critique of current thinking about leadership, especially the critical management studies literature, that points to problems with conventional studies of leadership but also with attitudes towards leaders within the world of work. The relationship between scholarship and public discourses on leadership within organisations is closer than on some topics, in part because business schools tend towards applied qualifications on leadership while commercial management companies rely on the same schools, and their models, when developing training courses. The political economy of leadership studies means that scholars and management consultants are entangled, and sometimes one and the same, all with incentives to simplify and dream unrealistically. Within both academic settings but also organisations ranging from tiny community-based groups to public sector bodies to global corporations, the conventional views tend to (a) classify leadership, (b) demonise or romanticise leaders, and (c) promote over-optimistic recipes for change. If leaders could just be agile, empowering, democratic, charismatic, transformational, visionary, servant-like, then organisations would thrive, so goes the promise.

As other critical scholars point out, the tendency to classify leadership has a long history. Scholars divide leading into different types, as far back as Plato with his three forms of rule: the rule of reason, of desire, and of spirit. In the twentieth century Weber's seminal theory of bureaucracy including three ideal types of leadership: legal, traditional and charismatic, and similar typologies still abound. Political leaders and their institutions are subjected to the same classifying treatment.

> Political scientists, and their sub-branches, tend to be tempted to create taxonomies and typologies of states and parliaments, or activities that take place within them – identifying their common ancestor or features and trying to group them into separable categories as if they are like plants. As Paley points out, they do the same with democracy: advanced

liberal, parliamentary, electoral and socialist (2002: 471). This scientific-like classification can generate insight but it can also obscure more than it sheds light, making the world appear more well-ordered and stable than it is.

(Crewe, 2021: 81)

Classification of leadership extends to a long history and multiplicity of ideas about what leadership is or might be in practice. These include perspectives that leadership is some kind of innate prowess, a trait, or something that can be passed down through generations in the tradition of the great monarchic and political dynasties that have been the mainstay of the modern world. Or it might be a style, skill or set of behaviours that can be acquired or learned through training or education, leading to reliably superior performance.[2]

While categorising can be useful to think with, the proliferation of schemes, models, and lists of leadership types can at times appear to be more about establishing pseudo-scientific credibility and commercial products and services than inquiring into what leadership means in practice. It is timely to shift the emphasis from classifying leadership to reflecting on the commonalities and differences in assumptions about, and practices of, leadership to enable different, and hopefully better-informed conversations about how people actually work together in practice. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have pointed out how these typologies and taxonomies are alienated from what people in organisations do in the real world, thereby failing to help scholars understand and leaders to develop their practice. Individualist perspectives are prolific and arguably serve to perpetuate neo-liberalist ideals and as Alvesson and Kärreman (2016: 143) observe, this attitude pervades leadership studies (LS) too:

In much influential leadership, there is an undertone of heroic mythology – where heroic individuals of true grit get followers in shape and performing as the leader intends. Of course this is most obvious in all the pop-management and Harvard Business Review-type writings targeting the mass market were [sic] the sole founder or CEO of a firm makes the big difference (e.g., Collins, 2001), but it also frames many academic LS of today. LS people seem to have seen too many John Wayne movies.

(Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016: 143)

Perhaps this relates to the broader perspective that business schools in Europe and the USA have become more about building their credibility and prestige than about education (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005). One of the problems with an individualistic approach to leadership, whereby leaders are held responsible for success and failure on their own, is that it inhibits education, too, or more specifically, the encouragement to consider what is going on between the leader and the whole organisation as well as its political, social and cultural and economic environment. Leadership always emerges out of local cultures, as the anthropologist Jones relates with reference to the example of various corporate settings in the American South (2005). Just as culture is a continual process of creation and recreation, so, too, leadership is a sub-process within it. Cultures, contexts or settings are not separable from individuals and the processes they engage in; but the relationship between the particular and the aggregated processes over time have consumed social theory, and not just leadership studies, for the last century. Getting away from the search for simplistic causal links, Grint explains how leadership is *situated* rather than determined by *situation*:

> we might begin to consider not what is the situation, but how it is situated. Shifting the focus from noun to verb facilitates the reintroduction of the proactive role of leadership in the construction of context, not in the sense that individual leaders are independent agents, able to manipulate the world at will, as in Carlyle's 'Great Man' theory, but in the sense that the context is not independent of human agency, and cannot be objectively assessed in a scientific form.
>
> (2005: 1471)

Where does taking a more socially or culturally situated perspective lead us? If leadership is less a property of individuals, then perhaps it's a set of expectations that relate to particular roles in families, organisations or society more widely, which individuals in positions of leadership then find themselves living up to or not. Such roles are inseparable from the relationships with individuals and groups that constitute their work. More generally still, perhaps the most we can say is that leadership is a description attributed to people who seem to have influenced others in relation to an issue that has become prominent. Thus, it becomes clear that leadership is less about types or traits that people can possess and learn, but instead

emerges out of the interaction between people. This more social perspective on processes of leadership renders the moral judgements, and recipes for change, more complex than an individualist approach: it no longer makes any sense to merely adjust a leader or the system they find themselves in, nor to criticise, reward or retrain them when they don't live up to expectations. However, if leadership arises out of the interaction between people, then it is hardly surprising that accountability and transformation become more of a collective challenge.

It is this challenge that our book is responding to by looking at what happens to leadership when seen as complex processes of relating. We don't try to come up with an essentialist definition that unites global political leaders, social activists, CEOs of corporations, or influencers with tens of millions of followers on social media. Instead, we take the view that leadership is a collection of themes in contemporary society with virtually unlimited evolving meanings (Griffin, 2002). In that sense, as we explore the connections between complexity and leadership, it perhaps matters less what Barack Obama, Greta Thunberg, Jeff Bezos, and Cristiano Ronaldo have in common as individuals, than the opportunities to think about the wide range of actions that they and other leaders take in response to others. In that sense, leadership might be seen in the terms of a Wittgensteinian rope: the task of understanding it then involves looking at the multiple threads that come up when people think about leadership, or try to lead, and trying to find out how they relate to each other.

Audiences and a summary of chapters

This book is written for academics, practitioners and pracademics (that is, those that do both) interested in leadership. We will disappoint those looking for simple recipes and soothing platitudes about leading. We assume that universalising moral judgement and simple advice about leading groups and organisations is a futile exercise given the unpredictability of social life. But this volume is for those with an interest in the everyday challenges of both individual and group practices of formal and informal leaders in different types of organisations.

The authors contributing to this volume bring a wide diversity of perspectives – from international development projects, to organising executive management education, to school and university leadership, to

supporting collaboration in public administration, to preparing astronauts for expeditions, to talent management, to developing leaders in organisations big and small. The chapters are written by senior managers, leadership development specialists and consultants who have all completed professional doctorates with the Complexity and Management Group (CMG), which we are part of as supervisors, at the University of Hertfordshire.[3] Since none of those who have completed a doctorate with the CMG reside in the Global South, we invited two colleagues with experience of leadership and its development in Africa to contribute. Both have experience of publishing, but we decided on a dialogue format for variety so we could explore their histories in a more discursive way (which is how the CMG always facilitates research). Our authors and interlocutors are writing and speaking from Denmark, the UK, the US, Israel, Ethiopia and South Africa, but about a range of other countries in which their organisations work as well. Each perspective brings new aspects of thinking about how leadership identities are constructed and maintained through examining the detail of everyday interactions. This is presented in almost all of the chapters in narrative accounts of the authors' own experiences, from which they then try to identify patterns that they see across their industries, or amongst people more generally.

This diversity of leaders is further complicated by the ways that leadership practice is connected to everything that happens in organisations just as decision-making and power struggles get entangled with all that goes on between interacting agents and groups. But in one volume there is never the space to comprehensively analyse leadership, so all we can do is draw attention to some neglected themes: relationships in practice, formal and informal patterns of communicating, and research-based decision-making, as just a few examples. The chapters are divided into two sections, the first focuses on exploring their experiences of leading, and the second on experiences of the practice and politics of developing leaders.

Part I: Being leaders

Part I begins with Keven Bartle's exploration and critique of contemporary school leadership theory, paying attention to three myths of transformational leadership: that an enduring state of harmonious relations between staff is both possible to achieve and desirable; that the complexity of school performance can be represented in abstractions and metrics that become

increasingly detached from the social relations they are meant to represent; and that headteachers have special powers that enable them to lead distributed leadership teams. Bartle is the headteacher of Canons High School in North London and uses his experiences as a school leader interacting with the schools' regulator in England to argue for a different understanding of school leadership that engages more fully with the inescapability of conflict and relational nature of responsibility in organisations. He offers some suggestions for alternatives influenced by the pragmatist idea of the community of inquiry and Hannah Arendt's conception of plurality.

In Chapter 3, international development consultant with Sweco Danmark A/S, Leif Iversen uses his experience of having to take over a faltering project to explore and explain key ideas from pragmatist philosophy and the complexity sciences in relation to leadership. His chapter problematises rationalist conceptions of acting, offering instead a formulation from the complex responsive processes perspective. This includes considering the relationship between means and ends, and an exploration of time as both non-linear and irreversible. He ends with the articulation of a key paradox for leaders: that of being both deeply involved in complex processes of social relating while at the same time wanting to observe them and get an overview. Iversen offers reflections about the development of his own practice as an invitation to others to consider how they are engaging with similar problems.

In Chapter 4, Rikke Horup shares her experience of consulting for public sector managers from a Danish municipality to further their aim of developing collaborative leadership. She is Associate Professor of Leadership at the University College of Copenhagen, and explores how inquiring into the rhythms of time and space in everyday life can help to regain a sense of freedom in the context of what she sees as the alienation leaders can feel when faced with ever-changing expectations and demands to deliver. Horup uses the Lefebvrian concept of *rhythmanalysis* to describe how in addition to being temporally and socially contingent, the construction of leadership identities is also *spatially* contingent. She inquires reflexively into all of these aspects of interrelating to offer a different understanding of what leaders could be doing. Importantly, for Horup, this establishes research into ongoing patterns of relating in time and space, with a genuine openness to the otherness of others, as a core leadership task.

Part I ends with the editors in dialogue with Adam Habib, Director of SOAS (University of London) and former Vice-Chancellor of Wits University in South Africa. He tells us about his experience of being a scholar-activist, senior manager and vice-chancellor of universities in South Africa and, more recently, the UK. Universities should be places for public debate, deliberation and freedom of expression, he argues, but they are also political domains with complex power relations to navigate. Focused on achieving financial sustainability and social justice, he has learned through practice how to act politically – through radical pragmatism, attention to context and making alliances – but also to delegate, steward, acculturate and hold people accountable. He reveals the centrality of courage to leadership in a historical moment when many leaders are too swayed by individualistic sensibilities.

Part II: Developing leaders

In Chapter 6, Sharon Moshayof, Managing Director of a talent development and change leadership firm working globally, takes a critical look at leadership development, based on her experience of developing leaders in multinational corporations. She notices the dominance of trait theories of leadership in the organisations she has consulted for, and how these inform leadership development characterised by prescriptions for success, 'empty talk' and the general absence of space for exploration. She also found these themes reflected more generally in the various leadership webinars that she attended during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Moshayof offers an alternative perspective on leadership that places greater emphasis on interdependence, unpredictability and emergence. From this basis, she argues that 'cans of worms' are worth opening as they may offer a more fruitful way of supporting leaders to make sense of their experience and develop ways of going on with others.

In Chapter 7, leadership and Organisational Development (OD) consultant and educator, Sam Talucci takes us to the Dirty Devil River Canyon in Utah, where his experience of leading a group of Astronaut Candidates from NASA on an expedition training exercise provides the basis for his argument that, counter to perspectives that suggest leadership is an individual capacity, leading is most helpfully understood as a social process and group activity. Talucci explores how paying attention to everyday activities

and interactions can provide new understandings of taken-for-granted concepts such as communication, causality, decision-making and doubt, which taken together lead to a different way of thinking about what leaders are doing. He highlights thinking, experience, reflection and interaction with others as a means to create new knowledge and understanding.

In Chapter 8, Kevin Flinn uses his experience as a former member of faculty on the leadership and change module of an Executive MBA at the University of Hertfordshire to reflect both on the role of groupwork in management education, and the role of module leaders running such programmes. Drawing on key ideas from group analytic psychotherapy as practised by the Institute of Group Analysis, which he himself encountered as a student on the Doctor of Management programme at the University of Hertfordshire, Flinn argues for the inclusion of ongoing experiential groups of different sizes in MBA programmes, as a way of enabling leaders to develop curiosity about how they relate to each other. He is careful to acknowledge the demands these activities may place on students and how faculty members are just as susceptible to becoming caught up in manifestations of anxiety, which play out as dominant themes in society, such as race or gender.

Chapter 9 is by Tali Avigdor, who at the time of writing was the Founder and CEO of a talent management firm in Israel. Avigdor makes a critical case against traditional ways of thinking about talent management and its presumptions that leadership potential can be objectively assessed and individuals' future performance can be predicted. She suggests these presumptions offer opportunities to avoid the discomfort of engaging with the political nature and risks to belonging and deny the power imbalances that interdependence involves. Avigdor argues instead for engaging in processes in ways that take more account of the complexity of human interaction, involving doubt and practical judgement, that re-emphasise the moral responsibilities that properly rest with the parties who co-create talent management processes.

Part II ends with a dialogue between the editors and Sewit Haileselassie Tadesse, aspiring scholar, manager, and board member in various volunteer-based organisations aiming to empower women and youth. Sewit describes what the Ethiopian political and social context means for leaders like herself who find themselves negotiating patriarchal traditions nationally and neocolonialism in international development encounters. She explores the

collective production of inequality and the dilemmas she has encountered when choosing to transgress taken-for-granted social norms and the careful balancing of pursuing social goals on behalf of others with personal well-being. The dialogue ends with her reflections on the importance of leaders researching the historical, gender, and relational dynamics that constitute the social fabric of organisations and societies, before taking action as a way of attending to workers' needs and avoiding inadvertent abuses of power.

In the final chapter of the book, we review the Wittgensteinian rope that has emerged from our authors' contributions taken together, as well as our own role as editors and the choices we have made, and the rich account of leadership they provide compared to the simplified prescriptions of many leadership theories. We reflect on the ethical implications of having more of the experience of leading in view and then draw out the significance of these collective experiences for leadership more broadly.

Themes: improvised practice, communication and judgement

In general, this volume deflates the more orthodox discourse on leadership which is often written about in heroic, individualistic and instrumental terms. Rather, we understand leadership as social processes and group activities involving power relations and processes of mutual recognition. More specifically, three main themes emerge from this book:

1. A practice-based understanding of leadership
2. Formal and informal communication in leading
3. Research and practical judgement by leaders

A practice-based understanding of leadership

All our contributors write about what happens between people in practice when they get involved in leadership. Their bottom-up and participatory, rather than top-down, approach to research means they observe and analyse what takes place in everyday settings between people at work rather than speculating on the basis of principles, rules or possibilities abstracted from context. This does not mean they avoid theorising. But their theories are grounded in practice rather than abstracted possibility, building up their

interpretations by taking account of plural interests, perspectives and motivations. To ensure a rigorous attention to practice, all contributors generate their data in part by relating narratives of real experience. The historicity of narrative enforces a practical and theoretical unfolding of action, ideas and intention over time and in specific places, whether they are Israeli companies, the Danish public sector or UK universities. This kind of narrative inquiry and analysis involves practice-based theorising rather than the construction of theory based on taxonomy.

The focus on practice is a departure from much literature and public discourse on leaders. Underlying most leadership approaches is an assumption about how good leadership is fostered by encouraging value and rule-following behaviour by both leaders and followers. And this in turn is premised on a systemic, structuralist or institutionalist understanding of human behaviour, which all share in common the idea that people's actions are determined by ideologies, rules or norms. This has been challenged by social theorists, most influentially by Bourdieu originally in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977: 22–30), who argues that rules are used as much to rationalise action after the event as to drive or influence it. To discern what happens in leadership, or any other social process, you have to consider what people are actually doing as individuals and in groups in everyday encounters, through which rules emerge and are negotiated through further everyday encounters. So, rather than conceiving of leadership in terms of ideas or rules or norms, a good theory needs to look at how ideas, rules, and norms play out *in practice* between people in entangled and sometimes contradictory ways.

As our authors describe, the leadership theories that we find in management studies literature, but also in the discourses of practitioners including leaders themselves, can be disconnected from what actually happens in daily practice. While acknowledging these theories that permeate management team discussions and leadership development discussions, what leaders are actually doing often departs from organisational rules, from so-called 'best practice', and even from what they claim they are doing. To give one example, the rhetoric of talent management is that the potentially best leaders can be objectively identified early and nurtured so that they can rise to the top with even greater speed and effectiveness. Avigdor points out that this rhetoric is betrayed by what happens in the real unfolding of talent management; talent assessments are inherently political and contingent

social processes themselves and as such cannot predict those who will get promoted with anything like the accuracy that is implied in their claims.

Since the study of the practice of leading is even more demanding than trying to inquire into rules, especially if the latter are helpfully written down in policies and handbooks, how do we know what to look for when studying the practice of leadership? It requires reflection on what we mean by leading. Firstly, we might consider the appearance and performance of leadership; the frontstage, as Goffman (1959) called it, that involves the 'looking like a leader' to an audience. You need to look the part. Secondly, the symbols of leadership can be important: being the author of a hugely ambitious business plan; wearing smart clothes and looking presentable; regulating your emotions by depersonalising yourself so you seem to convey remoteness and embody the whole organisation – these are all common pressures. Moshayof reveals that this performative side of leadership development can be counterproductive. In the decontextualised leadership models based on idealised versions of leadership – 'Be bold and take smart risks' – it is the departure from practice that coaxes people to resort to superficial and overly positive abstractions. Thirdly, the excessive positivity and ironing out of the dark side of leadership practice mean that the inevitable contradictions, and even sometimes 'violent innocence', get overlooked (Vince and Mazen, 2014). Of course, people in different sectors and cultures create variations on this theme. But there is a general pattern that symbols of leadership get fetishized so that people can be more impressed by symbols and outward appearances than what people say or do with other people when trying to work together.

Formal and informal communication in leading

Leaders have to find a way of communicating to the wider community or organisations, whether directly through texts or speech or images or indirectly in the sense of mediated through TV, digital media or spokespeople. Huge amounts have been written about communication within organisations but most of the focus has been on sender–receiver theories, even though it is clear from social theory that meaning emerges in the interaction between people, but that people respond to each other by a wide array of means too (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 344). Of these various forms of communication, it is 'ritual' that is most neglected by management theories on communication.

The ritualised meetings and processes of consultation that require leaders to perform as if they are far more in control than they can possibly be, and the way interaction is ritualised, have profound effects on relationships between people. Rituals always rely on rules, repeated rhythms and symbols to create events that convey meaning, reaffirm (or less commonly contest) hierarchies, create continuities of identities and relationships and reproduce the perceived legitimacy of leaders. Courts inspire awe in the process of a trial, for example, but also in the person leading it: the judge, in part by ritualising the interaction. Parliaments couldn't function in any orderly way, given the inevitable range of opinions and interests within it, unless someone – in the UK it is the House Speaker – is invested in authority and the hierarchies are on display by stipulating where and how people stand, sit and speak (Crewe, 2021). In corporate settings, board meetings are ostensibly controlled by the 'Chair' who often has a tight grip on what can be talked about, in what order and for what purpose. It is often the case that the more significant the decision, and the greater the likelihood of disagreement, the more encounters will be ritualised.

Ritual is usually a frontstage public performance in organisational life. It is the array of backstage interactions which contrast starkly with the formal processes and performances of the frontstage of organisations – a messy world of politics, covert alliancing and alternative hierarchies that paradoxically uphold the social order. Often, we see organisational communication getting pushed into the shadows, into informal interaction, gossip and hidden transcripts, more often than not about the managers or others in powerful positions (Scott, 1990). By writing about gossip, and informal conversation more generally, it could sound as if we are referring to a trivial activity. But sociologists have pointed to how central gossip can be to maintaining or changing relationships between people. Elias and Scotson wrote about this in their ethnography of a town in the UK's Midlands – *The Established and the Outsiders* – in which they relate a story about suburban development on the outskirts of an industrial town (1965). They are writing about how gossip was vital for maintaining networks and for differentiating from people who were seen as inferior, rejecting 'the other' through blame, and supporting their own networks through praise.

Despite its neglect in organisational studies, gossip is a critical activity in the inevitable politics within organisations, for fortifying and demolishing others in the power struggles that go on between factions. Alongside the

formal prescriptions for leaders, informal processes of organising – like gossip – are as important for the construction of leadership roles. Gossip may be vital for nurturing one's alliances and undermining opponents in any community or organisation, and the more senior someone is in a hierarchy, the more they tend to get tangled up in power struggles with their attendant activity of gossip. So, the practice of being a leader may mean you will gossip, and be gossiped about, and however much you try to censor people, they will find a way to communicate in the shadows. Gossiping is not necessarily strategic, or not consciously so; it is often an activity that people enter into as a way of coping with emotion, telling narratives infused with judgement to keep forging their identity and making sense of the world around them. Perhaps counterintuitively, gossip may therefore be a key activity for creating culture and doing politics since leaders tend, or at least aspire, to be central to both. And yet to teach the skill of diplomatic gossip on leadership courses would be shocking.

Going a step further backstage, what about the aspects of communication that people engage in without even acknowledging them? Psychoanalytical theory offers a rich account of how individuals and groups can respond to experiences of stress and anxiety through the construction of defences, as one of our authors, Flinn, explains. Leaders may develop defensive coping mechanisms that help them avoid their individual anxiety, which may show up as an inability to acknowledge aspects of their experience which do not fit with their own self-image, or the expectations they think others have about them. This may lead to behaviour that is unexplainable in the context of what they are trying to achieve, feelings of inadequacy perhaps revealing itself as so-called imposter syndrome, and may throw those around them into uncertainty and confusion. These themes may be more accessible in the conversations leaders have with themselves, or those outside of the groups they lead – coaches, therapists or family members, for example ('offstage' in Goffman's terms) – so the performance of competent leadership can continue. They may even be impossible to articulate if the anxiety brought about by their acknowledgement is intolerable.

The same goes for group experience, which from the perspective of human interaction as complex responsive processes, has the same structure as individual experience. In her seminal paper on social defences, Isabel Menzies Lyth (Menzies, 1960) described how group members could collude in creating mechanisms that help them to avoid anxiety that otherwise

might lead to personal disruption and social chaos. In the study observing the dysfunctional defensive mechanisms among a general hospital's community of nurses, she suggested that the strong and conflictual feelings aroused by having to deal with disease and dying patients led to group behaviour that was unexplainable from the perspective of aiming to care for patients. These included the attempt to eliminate decisions through ritual task performance, reducing the weight of responsibility in decision-making by checks and counter checks, collusive social redistribution of responsibility and irresponsibility, purposeful obscurity in the formal distribution of responsibility, the reduction of the impact of responsibility by delegation to superiors, and detachment and the denial of feelings. Leaders will be as much caught up in these processes as others and the implications for an exploration of leadership is that all of these features of social life need to be in view to come to an understanding of leadership that resonates with experiences of leadership.

Research and practical judgement by leaders

Talucci draws our attention to our final thread in the practice of leading: the complexity of *decision-making*. The prevailing rhetoric found within organisations, on business school courses and within management studies literature, is that leaders have individual qualities that enable (or disable) decision-making, management and 'success' (as defined by the leaders). Be they promoting a tightly controlled operational grip, loosely guided holocracies or anything in between, the components of 'successful' leadership – and the skills needed to execute them – tend to be presented as detemporalised, decontextualised and based on understandings of culture and power that do not seem to reflect the actual, day-to-day experiences of leading and working with others. Often, these leadership approaches are taken up in ways that encourage speed and decisiveness, closing down research, contestation and even discussion. Talucci points out that speed and dictatorial decision-making increase the risk of accidents, and even death on expeditions, the implication being that it is dangerous in other leadership settings, too, even if the consequences vary. He explores what happens when you think of leading as more of a social process, an interactive encounter where you negotiate next steps by taking account of diverse views, interests and anxieties.

What does this 'taking account', or research, involve? Iversen and Horup inquire into how vital research is to processes of leadership. Acting doesn't involve a rational assessment of choices in Iversen's view, but rather a weighing up of means and ends in multiple, fragmented, confusing and emerging processes that amount to a paradox of involved detachment. When leaders realise that they are always acting irreversibly into uncertainty, and can do so in more or less informed ways, then they will surely take research and reflexivity more seriously? Horup's chapter offers complementary insights into how and why research is an important part of leadership. If you are going to take the task of collaboration on board as a leader, and all our authors make the case for it, then you need to know about those around you. By inquiring into the way interlocutors navigate both time and space with divergence and shared rhythms, you enhance your capacity to improvise into encounters with others in ways that create a greater sense of possibility for all. As Horup puts it:

> By collaboratively inquiring into the different understandings and the ambiguities of everyday organisational life, leaders might find new ways of interacting. The emphasis on the temporal character of human interaction in everyday organisational life provides us with the ongoing opportunity to make sense of our experiences and to find ways of moving on. So, in seemingly stuck and alienating rhythms, we might find degrees of freedom to improvise in new ways with one another through collaborative inquiry.[4]

Bartle comes at this question about how leaders might collaborate more fully from a slightly different direction. He is also influenced by the idea of taking account of plurality, drawing on the ideas of Hannah Arendt, but emphasises that this is necessary in the face of the inevitable conflicts you find within any group. In contrast to idealised versions of leadership that create harmony and co-operation through shared vision or values, Bartle's chapter reminds us how important it is to notice the power struggles that go on in organisations. No amount of wishing away conflict will erase the differences, disagreements and inequalities that are a feature of any encounter between humans. How such differences between people are both individual and structural (e.g., based on gender, race, seniority or class) will play a vital part in their capacity to act, aspire and lead.

All authors prioritise reflection as part of a process of research to increase people's capacity to act. They are in good company as part of that might be called the pragmatist school of management, with Shotter and Tsoukas describing what they call deliberate thinking – or thinking with deep research – as a mental as well as bodily process through which you can become aware of the broader context as well as the particularity of the specific situation. The process involves 'wandering around' within the situation, trying to articulate it in words, and then discerning how it 'talks back' to us (2014: 232). If we assume that action requires this kind of meandering research, then the same argument can be made about decision-making even more strongly. Decision-making is a form of action that has more consequences than other actions, which is why Alvesson and Sveningsson conceive of leadership as 'the extra-ordinarization of the mundane' (2003: 1435) and why Mead writes that:

> occasionally a person arises who is able to take in more than others of an act in process, who can put himself into relation with whole groups in the community whose attitudes have not entered into the lives of the others in the community. He becomes a leader.
>
> (1934: 256)[5]

Imagination is vital when making decisions rooted in an understanding of plural attitudes and interests. Imagination is under-recognised in management studies, which is why many of our authors turn to social theorists and philosophers who write about people in general rather than only those involved in organisational contexts. Their assumption is that it is possible to generalise about human processes because the way we interact with each other and the world has both universal and locally contingent themes. Taking a pragmatist's view of decision-making, or making practical judgements using Dewey's phrase, means rejecting a rationalist view of thinking processes. Rather than a detached calculation of factors, practical judgements entail imagination, an open mind full of doubt, an emotionally responsive attunement, an awareness of specificity and a sense of history to understand what it means to be human (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014: 237). After all, leaders are not different to other people – they are merely engaged in relationships with others that mean that their experience and impact are magnified in significance.

Notes

1 Emma Crewe's contribution to this edited volume is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 834986). For details about the project, see www.grnpp.org.
2 For a typical example of this, see www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/10-common-leadership-styles, accessed 21 July 2021.
3 www.herts.ac.uk/courses/research/dmanma-by-research, accessed 22 December 2021. Although colleagues in the Global South have been interested in joining this course, funding remains elusive. Any suggestions about funding sources to support students from these regions, please contact the editors.
4 P. 92, this volume.
5 We note the anachronistic quality of Mead's reference to men in this quote and see this as reflecting the period in which he was writing; we obviously regard his comments as relevant for people of all genders.

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PART I

BEING LEADERS

The practice of leading implies movement from endlessly revisable understandings of the past, through plurally experienced presents, into futures that can never be predicted. The complex connections between people and the unexpected ways in which their actions can be taken up mean that leaders have to use their imagination to anticipate but also be equally ready to improvise. And they must do this whilst participating in the reproduction and evolution of dynamic webs of the power relationships and ideals of their communities. Perhaps it is not surprising that the word *leadership* implies a vessel which can only be handled by many, travelling from one place to another – sometimes by winning hearts and minds, and sometimes through various forms of coercion and collusion, and usually a mix of both. This social, political and relational perspective of leadership is the premise shared by all the chapters in Part I, which inquire into what it is like to lead others.

Our contributors are writing about what it is like to be leaders in different contexts and with varying histories: Bartle is a White British man in the position of headteacher in London; Leif Iversen is a White Danish man who manages consultants working in international development; Rikke Horup is a White Danish woman who teaches leadership to managers in the public sector in Denmark; and Adam Habib is an Asian South

African man and Vice-Chancellor of universities in South Africa and the UK. They are in conversation with us, the editors: Kiran Chauhan, an Asian British man, has experience as a consultant to leaders, and supervisor to those learning about it, whilst Emma Crewe, a White British woman, also supervises such students and manages international research coalitions. Despite some diversity in gender, discipline, race, origin and current context, we share a critical perspective towards conventional ideas of heroic or demonised leadership. Why do we all have this in common and perhaps even an interest in phronetic decision-making, the role of communication and reflectivity in leading, as well as how the social, political and emotional is entangled in leadership work?

We would argue this commonality is rooted in taking seriously patterns of work created by thinking, experience and action in the everyday rhythms of leading in organisations. In short, our claims are based on our experience. Turning away from the dizzy heights of idealising leadership, or the depressing cynicism of assuming it is always oppressive, these chapters offer both intellectual insights and practical ways forward that judge the ethics of action according to context and only after careful and thorough deliberation. Each author focuses on their own theme, revealing how leaders have to develop the know-how to navigate plural communities (Bartle), time and unpredictability (Iversen), rhythms and contradictions (Horup) and power and conflict (Habib). And whilst this mix of theoretical commonality and thematic specificity might resonate with any leader, you can be sure that they/you will also discover their/your own questions and themes arising out of context, history and practice.

2

FROM MAGICO-MYTHICAL THINKING TO MAKING PROMISES AND FORGIVING

A HEADTEACHER'S CRITIQUE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

Keven Bartle

Introduction[1]

In his 1958 essay on human logicality and reasoning, 'The Fixation of Belief', C.S. Peirce suggests that one typical method of fixing belief in communities has been through institutions of the state being able to commit acts of violence against individuals with conflicting beliefs or doubts (Peirce, 1958).

> When a complete agreement could not otherwise be reached, a general massacre of all who have not thought in a certain way has proved a very effective means of settling opinion.
>
> (Peirce, in Talisse and Aikin, 2011: 48)

Hannah Arendt was a political thinker who was no stranger to totalitarian ideologies, having twice escaped arrest by the institutions of violence of the National Socialist state. In her 1951 essay, 'The Eggs Speak Up', she argues against the rhetorical defence of those aspects of totalitarian ideology that promote collective agreement about violence against the individual as being necessary.

> There is indeed only one principle which announces, with the same uncompromising clarity as the principle that 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs', the diametrically opposite maxim for political action … 'L'affaire d'un seul est l'affaire de tous'.[2]
>
> (Arendt, 1951b: 283–284)

In my experience, school leadership is a social process that rarely leads to complete agreement. Does this necessitate that school leaders must therefore resort to breaking eggs or committing metaphorical massacres? Is complete agreement in a leadership team, the establishment of a certainty about how to proceed, vitally important for leaders in seeking to mitigate or resolve conditions of uncertainty? Can managers dealing with the consequences of hard-edged accountability systems afford the time needed to take the interests of one as being the interests of all?

I am Headteacher of a secondary school who is responsible for the education of 11–18-year-olds in London. I have held this position since 2014, having been promoted internally after six years of being a deputy headteacher at the same school. Prior to this, I had worked as a subject leader and assistant headteacher at a school on the outskirts of London in the early 2000s, after beginning my career in teaching in the mid-1990s in the north-east of England. People outside of education understand well the title 'headteacher', but enfolded within this role are two others that are not so well understood. I am also the accounting officer of an academy, by which I am accountable to the British Government for the performance of my organisation against a suite of metrics related to the education of children, employment of adults and the financial outcomes of the business. And finally, I am the chief executive officer of an academy trust which oversees the work of potentially dozens of academies within the trust's purview (in fact, there is only one academy in the trust). Whatever I am, my name is literally above the door, on inspection reports, on financial accounts and

on countless algorithmically derived charts and graphs that compare the outcomes of all aspects of my colleagues' work and my students' labours with those of other schools/academies/trusts. And because it is my name above the door and on the reports, it is sometimes very easy for me, and for others, to forget that I am not an omniscient leader capable of holding all the threads of school improvement, staff development and student achievement together.

At the centre of these 'Russian doll' roles, I am the most senior member of a team of 11 school leaders who work together, both collaboratively and conflictually by degrees depending on the specific situation, to attempt to manage the work of a school community comprising approximately 1,300 schoolchildren and 160 staff. Since 2019, the uncertainty of our work together has been compounded by two periods of crisis for our organisation, a negative inspection judgement and a global pandemic. Both of these events are captured in this chapter as an attempt to position my work less in terms of systems and structures and more in terms of complex responsive processes of relating. In doing so, I hope that this chapter illuminates the interrelated nature of our team's work together in ways that are helpful for other managers wrestling with similar issues in their settings.

The Big Bang for Education: A Brief History of Schools' Policies in the UK

The British Government of the 1980s, under Margaret Thatcher, is credited with the deregulation of the financial markets that has come to be known as the 'Big Bang' and which is widely regarded as having transformed, for better or worse, the stock market of London and the British economy. British school leaders and educational theorists will recognise that the same government also created another 'big bang' in schooling through its 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), which introduced sweeping changes that can broadly be summarised as introducing market forces into the education sector. Central to the ERA was the notion of parental choice, something unheard of until then in a system that had previously, through local democratic oversight, directed the vast majority of British students to their school places based on geographic proximity to the school.

To facilitate parental choice (in reality, the ability to express a preference for schools), the ERA included the creation of school performance tables,

commonly known as 'league tables', and an independent inspectorate of schools called the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). To rationalise the metrics underpinning the new accountability measures, the ERA also mandated a national curriculum which required that all schools taught the same core curriculum: direct comparisons could then be made between 'education providers', as was the idea, and with it a new marketised vocabulary. To create incentives around parental preference, arguably the biggest bang of the ERA was a move towards 'per-pupil funding' as a replacement for the local political settlement which had previously been able to direct resources according to perceived need. From then on, it would be 'bums on seats' that dictated the resources available to headteachers. Failure to attract 'customers' would result in a sting in the tail.

Perhaps the smallest bang of the ERA was the creation of the first academies; schools independent of local political control and oversight that instead received their funding directly from central government. It would, however, prove to be more of a big bang on a time-delay charge.

In 1997, the Conservative Government was swept from power with a crushing election defeat by the Labour Party under the stewardship of Tony Blair. Traditionalists within the party hoped that a similar sweeping away of New Right policies would follow, but Blair's political fortunes were allied to an agenda of modernisation that cemented the market reforms of the ERA in place. Parental preference, league tables, Ofsted, the national curriculum and per-pupil funding were all retained whilst academisation (the creation of academies independent of local government) was increased by the government with the stated intention of driving change at schools with a history of underperformance under the ERA measures. Instead of reforming the structure of education, Blair's government sought a revolution in standards backed up by significant financial investment and an emphasis on social justice. A policy avalanche followed, covering how teachers should teach, performance-related pay, workforce reform to introduce more paraprofessionals into the classroom and the creation of a National College for School Leadership to deliver government-approved training programmes. This policy blitz demonstrated a focus on the professionalisation of the education sector or an erosion of employment conditions, depending upon one's point of view.

The marketisation measures and deregulation drives of both these governments in terms of education policies met, perhaps ironically, their

biggest challenge as a result of the 2008 financial crash. Two years later, the Labour Government was itself swept from power by a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats pledging to balance the country's books through a short, sharp austerity drive that has now lasted more than a decade. Per-pupil funding, a central plank of the 1988 ERA, was repeatedly cut over the 2010s but, other than that, successive Conservative-led governments have retained and refined the accountability measures of the Thatcher government and standards agenda of the Blair administration. Schools have been asked to 'do more with less'. One sleight-of-hand way in which this has been done has been to massively increase the number of academies, allowing schools to opt out of local authority control and pocket additional top-sliced funding designed to support collaborative school improvement processes. To replace these programmes, successful academies are able to create Academy Trusts and build 'chains' of schools. These Multi-Academy Trusts are able to top-slice the budgets of the schools under their aegis and deregulate the pay and conditions for staff at those schools.

The legacy of the 'big bang' of the 1988 ERA has been profound and its reverberations, taking the form of a curious mix of decentralisation and centralisation, have echoed through the British school system ever since. But this is a chapter about the relational qualities of school leadership rather than systemic properties, so perhaps now is a time to show how local interactions of a school leadership team at a time of uncertainty related to the global pattern of school standards and accountability play out. The narrative, originally recorded for my doctoral studies, shows how our leadership team responded to a negative judgement by the school's inspectorate.

All individuals within this narrative material have been anonymised.

Scene 1: The Inspection

It was high noon when 'the call' came. The voice at the other end – calm, honeyed and courteous – belonged to David. He explained that he was ringing on behalf of Her Majesty's Inspectorate, Ofsted, and that the school was going to be inspected over the following two days. I felt unprepared, a feeling made worse when David asked me to send over our school self-evaluation form, or SEF. I told him we didn't have one at which point his silky voice faltered. This did not compute. "You

don't have one?" he echoed, sounding both shocked and ominous. The SEF was a statutory requirement for schools between 2005 and 2012, by which school leaders had to judge their schools against the inspection framework. It then became non-statutory and schools are no longer required to provide one. I had decided to do without a SEF, seeing it as a pointless document at best and, at worst, a way of seeking to control others and enforce their submission. David's incredulity made me realise how vulnerable we were without one. Anxieties about having not listened to others on my team who had argued for a SEF were forming a giant ball in my chest as David ended the call. This had not been the start we had needed.

The morning after the call, five inspectors arrived to test their data-driven hypotheses about the school by observing lessons, scrutinising documents, interrogating senior and middle leaders, and interviewing students. Having begun the process on the back foot, things went from bad to worse. Each member of the inspection team was as incredulous as David when they discovered we did not have a SEF, asking us, "but how do you know?" each time we met to discuss our work and made a claim about an aspect of it. We presented them with reams of evidence of how we thought we knew. Paper mountains formed in my office as colleagues came armed with documents to convince the inspectors that, even without a SEF, we knew our school.

Two days later I sat alongside Lisa, one of my deputies, to hear the judgement of the inspection team. The process completed; the inspection team were now gathered around a table to come to their final judgements. Lisa and I sat outside their circle, permitted to listen and comment, but after discussing each key area for judgement they would have the final word. Perhaps we had done enough to be judged as good. Lisa sat poised with her pen and paper to take notes. I leaned into the inspection team's discussion, as close as I dared, to listen and respond in a final attempt to convince them. Their first judgement about the quality of teaching would be vital, and it wasn't going well for us. I intervened to fight our cause but my challenges were dismissed and the decision came. As David uttered the words, "requires improvement" I slumped back in my chair. Ofsted had spoken. We had not been good enough.

On the one hand, the events described in this first part of the narrative seem to speak to the centralising power of government policy and their supposedly independent inspectorate. On the other, it also suggests that

the judgement by the team of inspectors, themselves current or former school leaders, was heavily influenced by the absence of a SEF that had been discontinued by the government of the day but nevertheless seemed to be integral to the assessment of whether my leadership team 'knew' their school. This leads to the question that I have been asking myself since: why did we not have a SEF when we knew how prevalent they were in our profession? What dynamics were at play within the inspection team and what dynamics were at play in my own team that a discontinued document could play such a central part in a multifaceted inspection process?

Scene 2: The School Improvement Plan

Three months later, my leadership team met to discuss the draft School Improvement Plan (SIP). The intervening months had been defined by mixed feelings of shock, denial, anger (at ourselves, each other, the inspectors, the school accountability system) and a tentative acceptance of our position. In the aftermath of the inspection outcome, I had written an action plan to help us kick-start the short-term improvements needed. As a result, the leadership team had been expanded to accommodate two middle leaders that the inspection report said should be involved to function more 'strategically' and two new assistant principals appointed to improve teaching and learning, another key recommendation. From now on we would discuss everything together to see our individual work in a team context. The SIP, a medium-term plan for the coming school year which had been discussed at many of our meetings since the inspection, linked the action plan to the school's longer-term vision statement. It had been a painstaking effort to bring it together in a way that, I hoped, captured the conflicting views expressed in those meetings. I devoted the two-hour meeting to discussing the SIP, giving time for others to have their say. For my part, I went into the meeting determined to listen, partly to avoid coming across as defensive should there be criticism, but also because I had already had a huge say in the document by drafting it.

The meeting began well. Broadly speaking everyone agreed with the thrust of the document. Then Lisa, in her to-the-point, blunt style, noted there was no part of the plan about creating a SEF. I bristled with irritation that she couldn't see that self-evaluation, if not a SEF specifically, was clearly woven throughout the whole document. I felt like I had compromised a huge amount in putting this document together

and left plenty of space for a SEF to emerge but was determined that school improvement ought not to be reduced to the creation of one. For the moment, though, I said nothing. In recent meetings keeping my counsel had had a seemingly positive effect on giving others the space to contribute and I wondered who else might take up the challenge of responding.

It was Kay, an assistant principal, who took up the challenge. Quietly spoken, her words carefully chosen, she voiced the points I was holding back from saying. She stressed the importance of professional learning and line management, arguing against a top-down approach to monitoring the school. I felt relieved but could sense her frustration that many in our team have not used the professional development processes she had created, which they had supported. I agreed with her that meaningful self-evaluation is rooted in such processes but again held my tongue.

At this point, one of the new team members, Kirsten, spoke fervently in support of more monitoring of staff. She spoke, as animated as a preacher, about the need to put children first. Her contribution culminated in a rhetorical question asking why our teachers were afraid of us entering their classrooms. Many school leaders talk this way, emphasising the importance of children over the adults in the organisation. I felt she was wrong about people not wanting the leadership team in their classrooms and put this down to the fact that she was new. She didn't know the school, I thought, forgetting that I had appointed her to bring this different way of thinking to our team. I continued to say nothing, which was becoming increasingly difficult but was, I felt, helping meaningful discussion and disagreement.

Kay's response sounded as if spoken through clenched teeth. Her frustration was tangible. I felt a sense of affinity that her work of years had passed over the heads of others. She challenged the team about how poorly we had used existing processes of validating the work of those for whom we had responsibility. I noted that her arguments left others in the team looking sheepish, embarrassed perhaps that she was right. I was eager to validate her diagnosis of a key reason for our failure in the inspection process, but was aware that in doing so I would be having the final word. Despite my lack of contribution, or perhaps because of it, the meeting had felt like a successful exploration of differing views of the good. There had been conflict and no shortage of emotions but people had made their points well. I concluded the debate saying that I had enough to make amendments to the SIP that I hoped would capture

the many viewpoints expressed. I experienced in that moment the usual frustrating feeling of having cut people off without bringing them to agreement and of having the burden of making sense of their competing viewpoints. I had a lot of work to do.

This part of the narrative opens up to scrutiny the dynamics of my team. It represented the first post-inspection disagreement we had had which recalled previous disagreements that we had come to see as partly responsible for our failure. Looking at it with hindsight (we now have a SEF process firmly established), I find it curious that we continued to argue the merits and demerits of having a SEF given its prominence in our inspection downgrading. Why did we not simply decide to 'play the game' at that time? Why were we still arguing about it given the jolt we had had?

The narrative also demonstrates how I, as headteacher, continued to influence crucial team decision-making. Although I was attempting to stimulate discussion, one consequence of my control over the drafting process is that it seemed to sideline and delimit the contributions of others. By remaining silent in the discussion of the proposed improvement plan I was allowing others to agonise over its contents and antagonise each other in doing so. At the same time, my concluding comments show how I was taking responsibility for negotiating competing ideas to finalise the SIP. These kinds of interactions have resonated through the years that I have been a headteacher, causing me significant anxiety in the process. The narrative also shows how values held by my colleagues are important to them, causing them to see conflict and confrontation at a time when collaboration and congeniality to one another appear to be most important to us to promote within our team. Surely, we needed to fight together rather than fight each other?

In this chapter I explain why my colleagues and I had come to see our argumentative interactions as inherently problematic but, at the same time, why we had continued to engage in such challenging discussions with each other. If this narrative shows the limitations of an approach that sees disagreement and division as a systemic property of the school standards and accountability agenda, why did competing values within our team feel so divisive for us? To make sense of these questions, I now consider how my management practice, and that of my team, has been influenced by 'transformational school leadership' literature and, in particular, two leadership theories that had significantly shaped my practice as a manager; the

theories of 'distributed leadership' and 'relational trust'. Because my role as a headteacher is fundamentally relational, reconsidering the theoretical paradigm of transformational school leadership has helped me better understand, and take seriously, the experience of others in my leadership team.

Transformational Leadership: The Dominant Leadership Paradigm in Education

Transformational approaches have become the dominant discourse in educational theory in the past 30 years, a period of time that coincides with the high-accountability era in the UK's education system, described earlier, and the entirety of my career in teaching. My first middle leader role was in 2000 and my first senior leader role in 2005, and so it is unsurprising that these theories have been consequential for my practice as headteacher. Since the turn of the century, transformational school leadership has been routinely promoted by school leadership training programmes, particularly through the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH) which I completed in 2007.

Transforming leadership, the forerunner of transformational approaches, was devised by the historian and political theorist, James McGregor Burns. Drawing inspiration from historic leaders, Burns 'salvages' aspects of charismatic and ideological leadership as strands of transforming leadership (Burns, 1978). In contrast to transactional leadership, which involves a 'muddling through' by leaders faced with a pluralist 'plethora of values' (ibid: 409), transforming leaders show mastery, using conflict to effect ethically good change. Leaders, acting on their values, transform systems and elevate followers through planned action that heightens 'motivations, purpose, and missionary spirit' (ibid: 437). Transforming leaders have a higher morality, keeping ethical goals in view, promoting congruence of purpose and motivation with followers so that 'social and political collectivity' (ibid: 452) follows. Paying closer attention to the lived experience of headship in the context of Burns' theory, I recognise the appeal of the promise that the moral values of the leader can transform and elevate the moral values of others to effect change with ethical intent. This contrasted with former headteachers in my career who had embarked on programmes of change in ways that I found divisive and uninspiring. However, my narrative shows

that even highly moral decisions, such as the one I had made not to have a SEF, can be as divisive as a decision to 'play the game' of the accountability system.

The application of Burns' ideas to organisational politics was made by Bass, who softens the possible anti-democratic facets of Burns' theory: authentic transformational leaders treat followers as ends, not means to other ends, to stimulate, engage and inspire followers to 'extraordinary outcomes' (Bass and Riggio, 2005: 3). Hallinger and Leithwood apply transformational leadership to schools, contrasting it with 'inherently managerial' transactional approaches that are not valid for schools leading 'the initiation of change' not just its implementation (Hallinger, 1992: 38–40). Leithwood argues that transformational school leaders reduce differences between people, whilst Hallinger stresses how transform-ational headteachers build capacity. Collaboration is crucial, not personal vision, and headteachers must use their authority to 'foster norms and beliefs' (Leithwood, 1990: 10). These approaches were appealing for me as a young manager in the way they contrast change initiation with imple-mentation. Transformational theories also appeal to managers by invoking school leadership as a communal experience, with assured leaders eliciting unity, congruence and shared vision to democratise schools as more community centred. As my narrative shows, though, taking a radical and change-initiating decision to not have a SEF does not lead to unity amongst a leadership team in which multiple people feel democratically empowered to disagree and present alternative views.

Recent research on transformational school leadership is largely uncrit-ical with one review concluding that it is 'the leadership style most researchers feel is appropriate for today's schools' (Anderson, 2017: 1). Researchers promote the centrality of the transformational headteacher (Moolenaar and Sleegers, 2015) in generating staff self-efficacy (Damanik and Aldridge, 2017), 'psychological empowerment' (Sağnak et al., 2015) and work motivation (Andriani et al., 2018; Kouni et al., 2018). Research on transformational leadership reports a positive impact on teacher per-formance (Aunga and Masare, 2017) and 'team learning' (Bouwmans et al., 2017) contributing to reduced staff turnover (Sun and Wang, 2016). Even where evidence suggests little impact on achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Dutta and Sahney, 2016; Boberg and Bourgeois, 2016), researchers do

not advocate abandoning transformational school leadership (Berkovich, 2016) because of its positive ethical impacts on schooling (Cherkowski et al., 2015).

A minority of academics critical of transformational leadership theories point to its neo-liberal nature. Transformational approaches function as 'corporate technology' (Gunter, 2018) to narrow the freedom of school leaders (Niesche and Thomson, 2017) and cause extensive damage to teachers and students (Hughes et al., 2019). Others suggest that its unbenign visioning (Gunter and McGinity, 2014) and the primacy of the individual is ethically problematic (Pendola, 2019). It is a wilful elite discourse (Veck and Jessop, 2016) that requires the thoughtless following of orders from those with control of power structures (Gunter, 2015) at a local, national and global level. My experiences of headship, as exemplified by the narratives, shows that the implementation of transformational theories cannot be viewed entirely uncritically or entirely critically. The decision to resist the game playing of the accountability system, to not have a SEF and to stay in democratic debate about the 'real' reasons for the Ofsted failure, point to a team who are not simply 'following orders'. At the same time, however, the tensions between us suggest that transformational approaches do not always leave members of my team feeling empowered, motivated or confident that their performance has been recognised.

Distributed Leadership Theories

There were two major schools of transformational leadership that have significantly influenced my practice; distributed leadership and relational trust. The first transformational school leadership theory I came across, in 2005 when I was a newly appointed assistant headteacher tasked with building student leadership processes in my school, was 'distributed leadership'. Developed by the educationalist Peter Gronn in 2002, distributed leadership became influential in school leadership in the early part of this century. Gronn was disturbed by a dominance in mainstream literature about heroic forms of school leadership, and an anti-leadership bias in critical management literature. He argued for a more social form of authority in which some, many, or all staff engage in leadership practice, making distributed leadership more than the sum of its parts. Gronn held that distributed leadership is effective when school leaders design, create and implement it

within their institutions so that individuals can synchronise their actions and form synergies within schools. This is not always easy as distributed leadership is cross-hierarchical, role boundaries are blurred and authority is segmented, potentially leading to disputes about jurisdictional authority and the pursuit of alliances.

Gronn's ideas were rapidly taken up by academics and by the British Government, becoming a core strand of the NPQH that I started in 2006. At this time, my understanding of distributed leadership was shaped by Alma Harris, a professor of Educational Leadership. Harris argued that sharing leadership responsibility is empowering and democratic because power is relinquished by school leaders. Drawing from empirical studies of distributed leadership in practice, Harris stressed the importance of a common culture within schools (Harris, 2004), claiming that distributed leadership in the case study schools led to improved student outcomes and enhanced teacher self-efficacy and morale. Harris recognised the need for support from transformational headteachers who distribute leadership in a 'top-down' way to create collective agency. Harris argued that this 'paradox' of a headteacher-led distributive approach is resolved through their interpersonal skills and a strong school culture. She acknowledged that headteachers must contend with significant barriers to implementing distributed leadership as the empowerment of those without positional responsibility can generate anxiety and a feeling of vulnerability for those who occupy such positions.

The work of Gronn and Harris has a number of assumptions that I can see have influenced my work with others, and which I recognise in the narrative about the inspection and post-inspection discussions. In this typical episode at work, it is clear that others in the school have significant leadership roles given, or distributed, to them. This, in line with the challenges of distributing leadership highlighted by the theorists, has caused jurisdictional disputes and anxieties within the team about their work and how it fits together. Thinking about the episode positively, we appear to find a way through these discussions, even though there is evidence that these are difficult for us, and I take on the top-down responsibility of generating collective agency by bringing their conflicting ideas together in a way that helps us move on.

Thinking about the same episode more critically, though, I notice that engaging my colleagues in discussions about a SIP that I had already drafted,

and which I alone would redraft, creates tension for all. It leaves us with a lack of clarity about what is negotiable and what is not. My decision to remain silent during the meeting is suggestive of a systems approach in which I felt that I could stand outside the debate. The feelings of affinity with one of my colleague's comments and disdain for those of others, which ripple through the narrative, demonstrate that this was not possible. These points reflect how we often call into question our ways of working together: are we individually ineffective or collectively dysfunctional, or both? Rather than see disagreements about our work together as generative of novelty, distributed leadership theories suggest defective agency, lack of synergy and a failure of culture. Perhaps the inspection team were right to require our improvement?

Relational and Multifaceted Trust Theories

A second theoretical body of work under the general theme of transformational leadership, which I came across in 2015, was 'relational trust' theories. The seminal text in this field, written by Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, drew from longitudinal research into Chicago schools to distinguish relational trust from 'organic' and 'contractual' trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Organic trust, typical of families, involves unquestioning belief in others which is not appropriate for schools. Contractual trust leads to constrained relations in schools, which are too complex for school leaders to expect or enforce specific outcomes and procedures. Relational trust has four properties that set it apart from contractual and organic trust: respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity. These properties enable relationships to achieve synchrony, lead to effective decision-making and confer moral authority so that disagreements are more easily resolved and control exercised. Consequently, colleagues risk failure and accept conflict in pursuit of the school's principles and the interests of children. Headteachers secure and maintain relational trust by being inclusive in decision-making, having a compelling vision, setting norms and showing regard for others, although they must also be prepared to use coercive power to reform a dysfunctional school community.

Subsequent research on trust by other American educational academics identified five facets of trust: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability and competence (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015). For these academics,

schools are complex organisations requiring a significant sharing of responsibility that is not easy to capture with traditional metrics. Consequently, this body of research uses factor analysis to provide quantitative data about the perceptions of school leaders, staff and students with regard to trust within schools and correlates this information with data about student performance. Schools must be shaped as 'professional bureaucracies' (Tschannen-Moran, 2009) by leaders who set appropriate norms, create bonds of trust, and provide a compelling vision. Formal control is necessary but most school leadership should be achieved through informal controls and trust to allow shared values and norms to emerge (Forsyth et al., 2011). The headteacher is vital to collective trust emerging because they possess emotional intelligence, optimism, empathy and are able to resolve conflict.

The work of theorists writing about relational trust in schools makes assumptions about the possibility of synchrony or harmony emerging from complex interdependent professional relationships. Their view that attitudinal surveys can capture the complexity of these relationships leads these writers to suggest causality between school 'culture' and student achievement, and vice versa in a seemingly virtuous circle of trust and performance. My narrative, exemplifying how my team responded to the negative inspection outcome, seems to suggest (as do these authors) that it is equally possible for a seemingly vicious circle of mistrust and underperformance to occur. The arguments over responsibility for the poor inspection judgement continues beyond the inspection, indicating a lack of trust within my team (the benevolence, openness and honesty of trust theories), but also the ability of the team to get things done together for the benefit of the school (reliability and competence, as the trust theorists have it).

To explain how schools break out of such vicious circles, multifaceted trust literature is replete with imagery suggesting that headteachers achieve this through transcending intersubjective relations. Headteachers are prophets, inspiring others through their vision and mission to help their schools fulfil higher purposes. Headteachers are also farmers, cultivating trust to harness organisational capacity, or shepherding trust between others in daily institutional life. The emphasis on the headteacher's role as optimistic visionary or culture shepherd in these theories seems a far cry from the events recounted here, my silence in the meeting doing little to resolve conflicts in spite of the ways in which I sought to bridge the divisions in putting together the improvement plan. Bearing in mind that

such disagreements are habitual (although still disturbing) features of our work together as a leadership team, the insights of relational trust theorists, like those of distributed leadership advocates, have left me wondering whether there is something inherently wrong with our team or with me as the leader of that team.

Transformational Leadership as an Example of Magico-Mythical Thinking

There are common assumptions underpinning both the literature on distributed leadership and that of relational trust. Both schools of thought claim their theories about relational qualities of organisational life can be reliably measured through the use of factor analysis to be easily implemented, and that lasting synchrony and harmony can be achieved between people working in complex organisations. These groups of academics also make claims that suggest that the headteacher can stand apart from others, can transcend relationships, to create effective schools. And finally, these theorists make claims for a school culture brought into being by the vision of the headteacher standing apart from others, and that this culture can unfold teleologically, given the right conditions, through intentional and instrumental steps on a deliberate pathway.

I have repeatedly noticed a contradiction between the experiences I have had as a headteacher and the transformational leadership theories to which I have subscribed. As exemplified in the events in my narrative, my team's work together is full of disagreement, conflict, negative emotions, attacks and self-censorship. Transformational school leadership, by contrast, suggests that headteachers can create a world of synchrony (Gronn, 2002), common culture (Harris, 2004), shared values (Bryk and Schneider, 2002) and greater deliberation (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). This negative experience of daily life as a headteacher can have only two explanations for theorists of transformational school leadership. Either the team is dysfunctional and must be coerced into appropriate behaviours by the headteacher, or the headteacher is incompetent and should be replaced. For transformational leadership theories, and their adherents, the headteacher is located at the centre of the explanation. Others disappear unless they are doing as they are told or as they are willed.

The sociologist Norbert Elias argues that we can think about our participation in figurations as being both involved and detached. Involved thinking is typical where scientifically causal explanations of events are not known and is expressed in the form of magico-mythical thinking (Elias, 1956), where metaphysical or transcendental ideas provide explanations for events. Citing Elias, Ralph Stacey argues that this mode of magico-mythical thinking, 'the creation of a mystery to solve a mystery' (Stacey, 2007: 297), is present in contemporary leadership literature. Chris Mowles argues that this can lead to leadership texts in which 'insubstantial nonsense is presented as though it were common sense' (Mowles, 2011: 110). Paying attention to the contradictions within transformational approaches, when considered in the light of my experience as a headteacher, I would like to argue that transformational school leadership literature relies on three myths that create mysteries to solve mysteries by presenting nonsense as common sense: the myths of enduring harmony, positional authority and complexity reduction.

The Enduring Harmony Myth: This first myth is that fleeting moments of concord amongst school managers can become permanent organisational features. Supported by the transformational leadership literature, advocates of distributed leadership say that it creates synergy, democracy and empowerment. Synchrony and inclusivity follow when schools implement effective relational trust. Although conflict is recognised by these authors, particularly jurisdictional arguments for distributed leadership and untrustworthy behaviour of others for school-based trust, their theories promise effective conflict avoidance and disagreement resolution. So, having followed these theories diligently as headteacher, why have I not seen the promised harmonious outcomes?

The Positional Authority Myth: The second myth concerns the special powers associated with a school's most senior leader. Whilst transformational leadership literature advocates empowering others and democratising schools, these changes remain dependent on the headteacher to jump-start movement, develop a common culture and resolve conflict through social control or coercion. Headteachers are therefore meant to possess interpersonal skills such as emotional intelligence, empathy and optimism alongside constant effort, vigilance and reflection in order to achieve high levels of care, distribution or trust. The headteacher is expected to manage the

contradiction of being in charge and not in charge, as well as the anxiety and uncertainty for others about what is distributed and what is not.

The Complexity Reduction Myth: A third myth is that complexity can be reduced to abstractions and metrics. Transformational authors claim that distributed leadership and relational trust are vital in highly complex schools that are shaped by the expectations of equally complex national systems and societies. Their methodologies involve the measurement of abstract concepts such as culture, climate and morale (from distributed leadership theory) and respect, competence and integrity (from relational trust theory). Aggregated data is correlated with student outcomes to quantify impact and is presented as causal to suggest that distributed leadership and relational trust lead to improved school outcomes. As with harmony, this idea of complexity being something that can be measured, packaged and implemented, does not resonate with my experiences in school leadership.

By positioning these as myths, I am drawing attention to their lack of explanatory power to help headteachers understand the disagreements and political chicanery of everyday organisational life in school and with other school leaders. This is principally because they rest upon assumptions of individual agency on one hand or, on the other, upon the shared values of the organisation. These conflicting assumptions about the parts and the whole of school leadership have, alternatingly, centripetal and centrifugal effects on human relating within groups of school leaders. We find ourselves feeling pulled apart or squeezed together, as events in the narrative show with the initially collective response to the inspection judgement, which then becomes individualised as we make seemingly irreconcilable cases for the reasons for our failure. The positional leader enacting these theories, the headteacher, finds themselves feeling and, in many cases, seen as entirely responsible for the emotional impact of such forces on others.

I am increasingly finding that relational theories are more helpful in making sense of my experiences of the interrelationships within my team. Central to my developing understanding of relationality are the ideas of the political thinker Hannah Arendt and the pragmatic philosopher John Dewey. As I will now explain, these have led me to three key insights that challenge the myths I have described earlier. These are that a) plural views of the good are an inescapable feature of organisational life, b) responsibility for action within organisational life is co-constructed relationally, and c) negotiating with others as a community of inquiry can help managers reduce the anxiety of uncertainty.

The Inescapability of Plural Views of the Good in Organisational Life

In challenging the myth of enduring harmony prevalent in theories of transformational school leadership literature, I am aware of the potential of moving from an idealistic view of the political arena of school leadership to an antagonistic view that celebrates conflict for conflict's sake. Arendt's work was rooted in her belief that plurality is fundamental to the human condition, recognising the agonism of political endeavour with others. Arendt saw plurality as a bulwark against totalitarianism as it helps challenge the single ideas in political life that claim to explain everything, and to disrupt a logicality that squeezes out thoughtful consideration of alternative ideas and constricts the space for collaboration (Arendt, 1951a, 1953, 1958).

For Arendt, action with others is our primary method for establishing a common sense (Arendt, 1981) of the world we inhabit so we can better care for that world and become visible to each other in our individuality. Common sense here is a sixth sense (Arendt, 2005: 50) that emerges between people as a multi-perspectival understanding of the phenomena about which they are collectively engaged through speech and action. It does not refer to a fixed point of agreement but is constantly in flux through agonistic consideration and reconsideration of the things we perceive to be common to us.

In these terms, transformational leadership's emphasis upon the headteacher's use of distributed leadership or relational trust to engender harmony is a recognition of the 'natality', as Arendt would have it, of headteachers; their capacity to speak and act in a way that is different or new. In my narrative, this is shown in the ways in which I close down the conflictual discussions about the conflict between Kay and Lisa by promising to take the SIP away to somehow reconcile the irreconcilable differences between them, without them. Doing so leaves me feeling frustrated, but also leaves their conflicting views of the good unexplored and potentially covered over.

However, headteachers do not need to always seek harmony in their work with others. They can also speak or act in ways that sustain a public space long enough to engage a plurality of perspectives and allow novelty to emerge as a consequence of encountering difference. Transformational leadership, though, tends to negate the natality of other school leaders because the myth of enduring harmony can encourage headteachers to lose

sight of others' views, of a common sense, in pursuit of alignment and compliance as the likely means by which harmonious ideals around which plural views of the good can arise.

Arendt's conception of common sense as a plural negotiation of values contrasts with transformational leadership literature. Here, co-operation and conflict functioning together uncomfortably are the likely states of the enactment of common sense-making within a plurality of competing views of the good. To resist having a SEF is not unequivocally good, posing risk to the organisation and to the individuals responsible for leading it, as shown by the Ofsted judgement. That judgement itself was not unequivocally down to the absence of a SEF and might possibly have been as a consequence of a lack of monitoring and as a result of failings in line management and professional learning. Through my research, I have been increasingly drawn to the inescapability of conflict in the organisational life of the school I lead. I have also come to recognise that an idealistic notion of conflict-free harmony is neither possible nor desirable and that conflict is not an antagonistic expression of dysfunctionality in my team. Instead, we are struggling for a good enough harmony to take the next steps together as a leadership team and in that case, the conflict that we engage in has to be seen as an entirely normal consequence of plurality. Why wouldn't we be arguing about establishing a SEF in the post-inspection period, or about what else might need addressing to ensure we succeed next time we face an inspection team? And yet, the transformational literature seems to cover over the importance of this plurality of views when its advocates emphasise the centrality of the role of headteacher in managing and resolving conflict.

Relationally Co-Constructed Responsibility for Action in Organisational Life

The myth of positional authority resonates with managers who find themselves in the crossfire of tensions described earlier, with leaders seeing themselves as being responsible for navigating others' interests to prevent dispute. The assumption that responsibility relies on the positional authority of the headteacher is prioritised above the collective responsibility of the group. This is shown in the second narrative which reflects how my team became stuck in patterned ways of thinking about their work and the work of others, even when that work had led to a negative inspection outcome.

My decision to privately resolve their differences, blending their interests in taking the responsibility for drafting the SIP, served to enhance their public disagreements about where we needed to improve together. It left none of them feeling that their work was recognised and left me feeling that there was no way in which I could find a harmonious way forward for us as a team.

Two more of Arendt's ideas are relevant here. The first is that no single person can be fully responsible for plural action because actions are unpredictable and irreversible, generating novelty as much as predictability (Arendt, 1958: 233). Plurality of numbers does not equate to Arendt's notion of plurality if the privately held values of the headteacher are imposed upon others. The second is Arendt's distinction between the private realm and the public realm, which leads to a more relational understanding of responsibility (ibid). The private realm is subject to the authority and control of a dominant individual whilst the public realm is a space of appearance for unique beings to engage in purposeful, sometimes painful, negotiation of competing goods. In the public realm, power emerges between people acting in concert (Arendt, 2005) not through the positional authority of one person within the group but through plural ideas of the good. Differing views operate as checks and balances on each other to generate a relational form of power without forfeiting individual agency and responsibility.

The unanimity promised by transformational leadership's emphasis on 'shared' values driven by those in positional authority is not possible in the public realm. It is a sign that people have ceased to think and are not engaged in political action. The moral and ethical dimensions of our work together emerge from and constitute our work together. The individual capacity to think, act and take responsibility for our actions, is crucial to understanding plurality and the public realm. Without individual responsibility for thinking and acting as part of a plurality, without the agonism of negotiating competing notions of the good, plurality fails to achieve its purpose and the public ceases to exist. This leaves a vacuum into which totalising ideals of the good and banally evil practices can emerge (Arendt, 1963). The alternative is a political ethic of a public realm in which the public space, participation and power are continually co-constructed by relationally involved individuals who are responsible to one another through the narrative-like interweaving of their speech and actions. This continual co-construction of the public sphere means that school leaders

have to reconsider their habits (Dewey, 1922) and to re-narrate their accounts of their work together.

Reducing the Anxiety of Uncertainty by Negotiating with Others as a Community of Inquiry

Arendt's work is extremely powerful in providing alternatives to idealistic transformational views of school leadership. However, her work lacks description of what a public realm of political action might actually look like. Pragmatist views of plurality and the public address these issues and help respond to the final myth of transformational school leadership literature, namely that headteachers can reduce the complexity of organisational life. This myth informs the methods of transformational research, in which metrics of complex social phenomena are correlated with school performance. In seeking to metricise complex phenomena, transformational approaches encourage managers to adopt simple ideals. Particular people and their problems become less visible in the pursuit of ideals such as distributed leadership and relational trust. Despite this, my narrative offers hope because the particular reasserts itself in our interactions with each other: the complex refuses reduction. In spite of the inspection report's simplification of the issues facing our school, and in spite of my SIP seeking to do the same thing, Kay's advocacy for thinking about how we manage the work of people in the school manages to cut through. In light of this discussion, we revisited the conversations and, in doing so, devised a version of the SEF that kept in sight Kay's concerns about the particular problems of working with people whilst, at the same time, making Lisa and those who agreed with her, feel more secure about our readiness for future inspections.

Relational theories within pragmatic philosophy helped me understand the importance of irreducible complexity for my practice. In 'The Public and its Problems' (1927), Dewey concludes that the problem of the public is to improve debate, discussion and persuasion. He identifies four ways improvement might be enacted: developing close attachments, staying engaged in discussion, heeding evidence in making judgements and employing an experimental method to social problems. Having concluded that conflict is inescapable in organisational life and that responsibility is a relational process, Dewey's ideas made me re-evaluate my experience of headship: to appreciate my team's attachments, the vibrancy of our

discussions, how information helps us develop our thinking, and how adept we are at experimenting together. I began to question the antagonistic ways in which I had experienced these events, unable to see the strengths of our ways of working together. How is it possible for managers to lose sight of the good things about their interactions with others? Is the most profound downside of transformational leadership theories that they promote unachievable myths, disenchanting managers in their work with others?

Dewey argues that ideals conceptualised as ends without close reference to their means are 'thin and wavering' (ibid; see also Iversen, this volume). Abstractions and absolutes are not unifying, but instead generate the heat of conflict without the light of knowledge. It is through the give-and-take of discussion with others that we develop a sense of our distinctiveness as well as a sense of community, able to engage in continuous inquiry together because we can adjust to see one another. It is in the particular and experimental experiences of entrusting and trusting, not the general and absolute ideals of distributed leadership and relational trust, that we are able to recognise the aspects of human relating that we are claiming to value. This is a 'democratic form of being together' (Loidolt, 2018: 55) rather than an idealising view of a democratic organisation which underpins, for example, distributed leadership theories.

The pragmatist conception of the community of inquiry is an example of how a democratic ideal of plurality might be enacted. Dewey (1927) describes such an ideal as something that exists which might be viewed as completed even as it is being socially constructed. In that sense it is paradoxical: the ideal is kept in mind when dealing with concrete instances of the ideal in motion, without idealising it as an abstract end goal to be attained whatever the cost. This means that communities of inquiry consider 'what ought to be' and 'what is' at the same time. The myth of complexity reduction within transformational theories loses sight of people by covering over the 'what is' of human interaction in favour of the 'what ought to be'.

The neo-pragmatist Richard Bernstein (1987) follows Dewey in arguing that the pragmatic ethos requires an 'engaged fallibilistic pluralism' in which engagement with others generates outcomes that are temporary, fragile, conflictual and contingent. Lasting agreement is not necessary as disagreements are clarified through experiment and dialogue that respect difference so there is enough agreement for us to go on together. For Aikin and Talisse (2016), pragmatic pluralism is uncertain and involves conflict

between competing ideas of the good that can be incommensurable. Wrongdoing is inevitable and the qualities needed to maintain interaction include humility, consideration and forgiveness. Conflict is inescapable and responsibility is relational in organisations. As my narratives show, agreements are fragile and our work is contingent in an educational landscape fraught with uncertainty for managers. Complexity reduction in these conditions is a mirage, and a not very helpful one at that. Managers will find that covering over disagreement in the pursuit of harmony, and losing sight of others' views in the pursuit of authority, may seem to offer a simpler experience of managing an organisation. But, as a brutal and very public inspection process has revealed to me, the complexity of life in an organisation will find a way to reveal itself in ways that are potentially more damaging than that which we seek to avoid through idealised and unachievable myths about managing our work with others.

Conclusion: The Importance of Promising and Forgiving for Leadership

In this chapter, I have been trying to understand why, at a time of unprecedented uncertainty for my leadership team, we have continued to disagree about the reasons for, and solutions to, our recent negative inspection judgement. Paying attention to our employment of the transformational school leadership theories of 'distributed leadership' and 'relational trust', I have recognised how we have come to accept certain assumptions within these theories. We have come to reify the idea that we can find enduring harmony in our interactions as a team, and that my positional authority as headteacher can somehow bring this about in ways that will reduce the complexity of our work together. These ideas contrast sharply with our lived experience of school leadership, in which plural views of the good (rather than harmony) are inescapable whilst responsibility for our actions is co-constructed relationally (rather than through positional authority). The complex anxieties of our work together may be reduced, but not eliminated, when we stay in negotiation with each other as a professional community of inquiry.

Conceptualising the public realm as a community of inquiry suggests how such a community might be negotiated in organisational life. In critiquing transformational approaches that are sustained by myths of

enduring harmony, positional authority and complexity reduction, I have argued that there are three facets of a community of inquiry opposed to these myths. In challenging the dominant leadership discourse in education, I have illustrated ways of working with others that recognise the inescapability of conflict and relational nature of responsibility in organisations. I do not, however, propose a mechanistic approach that can be neatly implemented in organisational life. Having concluded that plurality is contingent upon human relating, what are the alternatives to individualised approaches and their centrifugal tendency to split responsibility from others or a centripetal focus on shared values that removes individual responsibility altogether?

In considering this, I want to turn to a final insight from Hannah Arendt: that it is only in the humanity of human plurality that responsibility for the love and care for the world can be enacted, not systems, ideals or institutions (Arendt, 1958). Plurality and political action in the public realm are riddled with the uncertainty that has been a key theme in my empirical material. This uncertainty arises from the irreversibility and unpredictability of our actions together which, for Arendt, require the ability of making promises and forgiving. Not only are the entirely human actions of promising and forgiving necessary, they are also more reliable responses to the plurality of views of the good than the illusion of certainty offered by transformational leadership theories.

Loidolt (2018) follows Arendt in arguing that acts of promising, forgiving, and trusting, form an ethics of plurality rooted in social phenomena. The interweaving of the 'whos' of individual members and the 'we' of the plurality, imposes ethical demands (ibid). Our responsibility to others means the promises we make within pluralities are more reliable than those we make to ourselves and the forgiveness we receive in pluralities are more meaningful than self-forgiveness.

Final Remarks

Loidolt sees Arendt's ethical principle as:

> Endorsing everything that fosters plurality while rejecting that which flattens plurality and morally condemning that which destroys plurality.
>
> (ibid: 252)

In this chapter I have shown how transformational leadership is important to, but insufficient for, school leaders seeking to foster plurality. At the same time, I have shown in my narrative how transformational approaches do not flatten or destroy plurality within school leadership teams. For these reasons, in keeping with, but challenging the Arendtian ethical principle outlined by Loidolt, my chapter is a strong critique rather than an endorsement, rejection or condemnation of transformational literature. In avoiding rejection or endorsement of transformational approaches, I want to offer a reconstructive conclusion that recognises that these theories are likely to remain prevalent in education and will continue to appeal to school leaders. I end by summarising the potential ways in which professional communities of inquiry might help school leaders and other managers to create conditions in which those values might be functionalised in practice.

In critiquing the harmony myth, I have argued instead that a community of inquiry can help managers reduce the anxiety of uncertainty by recognising that the community, its interactions and its outcomes are temporary, fragile and conflictual whilst still achieving things together. Negotiating in a community of inquiry is an iterative process in which people can begin anew with each other, which necessitates the ability to forgive ourselves and one another.

In critiquing the complexity myth, I hold that a community of inquiry can help managers avoid idealising values by keeping concrete and particular means in view, resisting abstract and general ends to recognise that ideals are always forming and being formed. Negotiating in a community of inquiry involves individuals within a plurality adjusting to the specific issue under consideration, which necessitates the ability to make promises and keep them.

In critiquing the positional authority myth, I have argued that a community of inquiry can help managers maintain the public realm by respecting and appreciating the views and attachments of others whilst engaging in persuasion and experimentation with them. Negotiating in a community of inquiry is a relational process which necessitates individuals within a plurality trusting one another to keep promises and grant forgiveness.

Notes

1 This chapter presents work that was first explored in the author's 2020 doctoral thesis entitled 'The Struggle for Plurality and Politics in School Leadership Practice: Exploring the Importance of Thoughtful Action in Conditions of Uncertainty' available at https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/handle/2299/24596.
2 'The concern of one is the concern of all.'

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3

ACTING INTO THE UNPREDICTABLE FUTURE

A PROJECT MANAGER'S APPRECIATION OF A COMPLEXITY PERSPECTIVE

Leif Iversen

Introduction[1]

I work as project manager in a major European consulting engineering and architectural company where we involve ourselves in project preparation, studies and implementation of international development projects. We have our objectives, strategies, plans, tools and techniques which guide our ways of working, ensuring that we can act adequately and intentionally. However, we also acknowledge that in our daily interaction with colleagues, partners and clients, the acting can appear much less planned or structured. We experience more complex and emerging ways of working, develop new ideas, change our minds, seek alternative avenues and are influenced by others that are important to us. Therefore, if we do not just apply plans and rational, linear thinking, what does it actually mean to take action, to act, to do something?

In this chapter I discuss what it means to act into a situation, typically when we find ourselves in unexpected, complex, or 'stuck' situations, not knowing what to do – and yet still finding ourselves doing something, taking the next step, apparently leaving behind 'rational' decision-making. I argue how the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating helps us to understand the messy, entangled processes in the acting and I discuss the pragmatists' understanding that we do not always just fix our eyes on a theoretical, future goal but move forwards towards what is practically possible and what makes sense in the present. This includes understanding that acting has a time perspective as we experience our present situation through our interpretation of the past as well as our expectation for the future. I argue that taken together, these aspects present an apparently unresolvable paradox for leaders of being deeply personally involved in a process while at the same time struggling to maintain an overview.

Initially, I present a narrative from my practice as this illustrates some of the complex processes of taking action that I intend to discuss.

The story – taking over leadership

Our company had won a major contract to implement a five-year rural development project in a distant part of the world where we didn't usually operate. It was not in any strategy, but sometimes you go where your client goes. For the on-site team leader position, we had identified Juan, a freelancer with an impressive CV. He had previously worked in the region and he spoke the local language. I had taken over head office responsibility even if it had not been my preference as I had little experience with this type of project.

Initially, I maintained a somewhat hands-off approach to the project as with a strong team leader in place it should surely be running on its own. However, very soon we received complaints from the client, the local ministry, and other stakeholders and over the next month we had an extensive communication in which Juan expressed how difficult and frustrating he found the project, the working environment, and all the stakeholders, including the client. I had never met Juan face to face, but the way he always wrote very long narrative-type emails and spoke at length on the phone, using rather verbose language, made me somewhat wary.

One morning, I received a long-distance call from Mikkel, one of our key technical experts on the project and an old, trusted colleague

of mine. Mikkel spoke calmly but passionately: 'Leif, we really have a problem here and head office needs to do something about it'. A high-level delegation from the client – an international financing institution (IFI) – had arrived in the city on a monitoring mission, the members were now in the project office, and they seriously questioned the project performance. Mikkel had found it necessary to stand up and tell the client that 'as a long-term employee of the company I can promise you that we will definitely see this project through'.

I suddenly felt very tired and alert at the same time. I felt grateful towards Mikkel but also guilty about him being rather alone in the mess and with the unpleasant task of defending our position. At home, my director and I briefly discussed the usual options for actions, however I soon realised that I would have to take over immediately. I dreaded the idea of being on this difficult project – not at all in line with my private life and with my intention to work from head office for a while. I also recall, however, that during our brief conversation my dread of taking over became mixed with a feeling of having an opportunity to take up a challenge. My director wrote to Juan and terminated his contract and I travelled the next week.

One very early July morning, I arrived in the country, highly jetlagged and rather tired from an overnight flight. I was somewhat apprehensive and curious about what to expect upon arrival, entering a new country and a new culture. I met Juan who greeted me in a very friendly manner and led me to our project office which was in a basement flat and a bit of a dungeon – 'The budget, you know ...'. I felt somewhat despondent, reflecting on how our competitive kind of business never really allowed for a higher standard of facilities or logistics. It did not appear very inviting for a six-month stay. Juan introduced me to the 10–12 national and international team members working on the project – many more were still to be hired. I knew only Mikkel, and the remaining staff greeted me in a friendly manner but did not offer any opinions or comments about the situation.

Juan sat down at his usual team leader desk and I grabbed the empty one next to his. The facilities were quite basic, the team leader's desk being no different from the rest, but from the physical arrangement of tables and chairs it was obvious which one was occupied by the team leader. I did not suggest that we swap as I felt there was no reason to stress or demonstrate that Juan had been sacked. I was vaguely aware that I was also avoiding any confrontations.

Juan started talking energetically (nervously?) and loudly about the ongoing activities, ways of mobilising the villages, the critical budget issues on the engineering design, and the lack of money in the implementation budget. He appeared to be very sure about his ideas about how to run the project and I could understand how people around him might get weary of his style as he just talked over me, not listening at all.

I stopped him, suggesting that he gave me an overview of the practicalities, the office facilities, our stakeholders, and the project files. I also asked for a briefing about the project plan and the status of the first report, which had been rejected by the client and was now an urgent issue.

I sensed that Juan was sad that he had been sacked, but in the previous weeks he had been expecting it might come to this and I was relieved that he did not express any anger or animosity towards me. He asked, 'So how long do you want me to stay?'

I had previously been involved in laying off managers and going through redundancy processes and I had found it extremely difficult. I told Juan that I wasn't sure, but I thought it would be useful to work together for a period, say two to three weeks, to ensure that we had a good handover so he could provide me with a reasonable understanding of the project. I would need to come to grips with the management, finances, and administration immediately and it would be useful if he could keep the fieldwork moving. We would see how it worked out and then we could review later. I did have mixed feelings about the arrangement, as in one way I quickly tired of talking and working with Juan, but I really needed his expertise. I was aware that I had a lot to learn in a very short time.

I asked the office manager to call a staff meeting. I told the staff about the changes (Juan had already informed them about his dismissal) and how Juan and I would work together over the next few weeks. I later had a talk with Mikkel, looking to him for guidance. I believe, however, that there was not really anything new to be said – the project simply had to be reinvigorated before the client would come on another monitoring mission two months later. I sensed that Mikkel was exhausted and ready to go home for a while and I realised that I felt quite alone.

Next morning, with short notice, I was summoned to the ministry to be introduced to the general director in charge of our project, who spoke to me for half an hour in an extremely aggressive manner. He complained about the project, Juan's performance, our company's performance, the office manager's attitude, the budget, and he told me very

directly that he would prefer us out and another company in (our competitor in the bidding process – I now wondered what they had promised him). I had been warned beforehand and knew what to expect, so I felt a moment of sympathy towards Juan, acknowledging that he had had an uphill struggle working with this guy.

Juan and I went through the key activities on the project. He had travelled around in the region and promoted a new concept for financing the local infrastructure projects. However, the ministry would not allow this. Juan talked at length, kept explaining about the concept and how it had been used in other places. Frankly, I did not have a clue whether it would work or not; the message from the client was that we had to 'dismantle it'. I tried to listen to Juan, aware of my own ignorance, but I also got restless. I sensed that I could not engage myself while at the same time feeling somewhat guilty that I did not listen when I had no idea myself which route to pursue.

We went through the project files, reports, and communications and I realised that all important documents were only stored on Juan's old private laptop, not on any central project computer. We then discussed the accounts. Juan turned out the pockets of his shoulder bag, displaying a staggering amount of U.S. dollars and local currency on his desk; these were the project finances and our cash balance. I stared in disbelief, feeling that somehow something was not under control. Juan explained that we did not use our bank account as this would incur a negative interest. And no, we did not have a safe. I was not impressed at all and I told him so.

The rest of the day, I was very uncomfortable. I realised that I was not happy working with Juan; he kept telling me about the project, and names, events, programmes, plans, problems were all presented to me in a somewhat unstructured manner, whichever way I asked the questions, and I recall that I put down my pen, and stopped taking notes.

I needed to decide how long he should stay, and this should maybe not be for very long. But again, I was concerned that I did not yet have enough knowledge about the project, the team, the key issues or the main problems. Nor did I have the solutions to the problems – in my mind I was adamant that I should know the solutions before I took over. Alone that evening, I reflected on this uncertainty and recalled the same feeling from other projects or events where I had hesitated because I had felt uncomfortable and could not see the way forward. I tried to be the project manager and focus on the tasks at hand but at the same time

I felt myself being so personally involved – it was impossible to separate. Next day I would speak to him.

Next morning, I tried to look at the reports, but I wasn't focused as my mind was elsewhere. Sitting at my desk, I started preparing myself for the confrontation, but I was still unsure how to handle it. Eventually, Juan sat down and I now told him that I had been thinking about this and that I found it very difficult working alongside him. I had therefore concluded that he should leave now, not later as we had previously discussed. He was clearly surprised and asked if I meant that he should finish the same day. I confirmed, 'Yes, you should leave now'. He asked what I meant – if I meant *right* now? 'Yes', I confirmed. Then I said that I wanted him to pack his bag and leave the office.

I explained again how I felt it difficult to work alongside him and that from then on I wanted to handle this on my own. Juan sat quietly for a moment. He was obviously hurt but did not look angry. We exchanged a few more words about the practicalities and how to keep in contact, after which he got up, packed his bag, said his farewells and was gone within 10 minutes. I called the team into the room and gave them a short briefing.

I am not sure if I had planned it this way, but it happened in a sort of natural and emerging way. A couple of years earlier, I had been involved in walking someone out of the door although it did not feel right at the time, but I now sensed that my previous experience somehow helped me to make the move and say the words. This time I felt it was the thing I needed to do; I was suddenly sure that we should not work together any longer. I felt a sense of relief, although drained. I knew that I would now have an uphill job of getting this project going, but I felt that a major blockage had been moved out of my path. Later, I often pondered over whether I could have done this in a different way; I was not proud of what had happened.

This narrative aims to convey just some of the many deliberations, discussions, attempts to rationalise, attempts to plan, my uncertainties, personal concerns, potential conflicts and the awkward communication that I had experienced over a relatively short period of time. It begins to show how acting does not necessarily follow the linear, well-planned processes with well-designed outcomes, even when we do follow plans and may experience the expected outcome. A more detailed analysis will bring to surface the much more complex processes that occur when humans are

working together. I am therefore engaged in understanding better what it means to act into an uncertain future, in particular when one is not really sure what to do but still does something!

Traditional ways of understanding acting

The ancient Greek philosophers, who laid the foundation to Western philosophy, suggested that all our actions should be directed towards the *good*, which was the ultimate goal for humans. For Aristotle in particular, the reference point for all forms of action is deliberate, rational action related to things we can control (2009: 38–41), and in this perspective our deliberations are confined to the means, not the end (ibid: 44), because the end, *telos*, is considered a given (ibid: 220). This philosophy is reflected in later as well as contemporary Western economic, sociological and management theories based on rationality.

Contemporary pragmatist Hans Joas (1996/2005) describes different attempts to address the topic of action in various academic fields and points to the understanding of purposive–rational action as promoted in economic theories or in sociology. Notably, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1937/1968) outlines a broad and comprehensive theory which to a certain extent is inspired by economic action theory (Pareto, 1980) and the frameworks informed by classical (mechanical) physics (as well as the work of the German sociologist Max Weber). Parsons maintains focus on the elements of the action itself, the ends, the situation, and the norms regulating the action. Comparing with physics, he says:

> Similarly, it is *impossible* even to talk about action in terms that do not involve a means–end relationship. It is not a phenomenon in the empirical sense. It is the indispensable logical framework in which we describe and think about the phenomena of action.
>
> (Parsons, 1937/1968: 733, emphasis in original)

Joas describes how many scholars suggest that actions which deviate from the norm of rational action are classified predominantly in terms of this deviation, meaning as deficient modes of rational action (1996/2005: 40).

Obviously, the works of Aristotle, Parsons (and Weber) are extremely comprehensive, complex and continuously interpreted by many scholars,

but what I am pointing to here is the classic perception that action should ideally be as rational as possible, have a linear temporal structure, and that other modes of action are defined in relation to their degree of non-rationality. According to Joas (ibid: 147), all theories of rational action are based on three assumptions, namely that one is capable of purposiveness action, that one has control over one's own body, and that one is autonomous towards other individuals and the environment. In the same vein, classic management theories based on the Kantian understanding of a rational teleology, suggest that leaders should determine the goal in advance as well as the way to reach it (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000).

In contrast, I suggest that the actions I describe in my narrative are not always very rational, and even actions which may appear to be rational will (in Weberian terms) have strong elements of tradition, affect or value involved. In my hotel room I kept thinking that I should be able to sit down and make rational analyses, conclusions and decisions, determine pros and cons – but this process was constantly muddled up by all the doubts, concerns, uncertainties and the influence of other agents.

In the following, I therefore describe how I find it useful to understand acting in processual terms, as something both becoming and as a social undertaking.

Acting understood as complex responsive processes of relating

I would first like to argue that a project manager or a team leader is an integrated part of a process based on an alternative conception of action. Process metaphysics is the worldview that sees processes, rather than substances, as the basic form of the universe and invites us to acknowledge, rather than reduce, the complexity of what we experience (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010: 2–3). Following an example from Langley and Tsoukas (ibid: 5), in the project I described, the role and identity of being a project manager were continuously changing through the discussions and in the evening after Juan had left the office, I was not the self-same project manager I had been in the morning. Therefore, a project manager or a team leader is not a 'thing' or a fixed role; rather, their work constitutes *doing* things such as chairing a meeting or communicating with the team members in the office.

I therefore argue that leading a project team is a social undertaking, a patterning of complex processes that reach beyond any meeting, event, organisation, or group of individuals, and that this perspective is temporal (Stacey, 2003: 7). This process perspective has become increasingly important for me in my practice as project manager or team leader. As I increasingly adopt a social understanding of individuals, I also see how acting is not a task undertaken by an individual but is developing in the interaction between members of a group. In the acting, I find my colleagues and I are deeply involved participants where all our gestures, actions, and relations are forming others while we are being formed at the same time, sometimes in paradoxical circumstances.

I find that the theory of complex responsive processes of relating convincingly describes this experience I have of non-linear and rather confusing processes in management. Processes in an organisation and between humans are not directed by an outside authority but are simply comprised of the many and constant interactions between all involved including the outside environment.

The perspective has been developed by combining psychological insights, sociological theories and analogies from the complexity sciences. The American pragmatist George H. Mead gives detailed descriptions of the nature of human interaction (1932/2002, 1934/1967) and German sociologist Norbert Elias takes an interest in how human societies develop (1939/2000, 1978, 1991/2001). However, Mead and Elias do not explain how wider, circular and complex patterning of gesturing and responding between ever-increasing numbers of individuals can develop into the societies that Elias describes (Stacey, 2003: 65).

Stacey and colleagues, therefore, turn to the insights one can gain through analogies in complexity sciences and, more specifically, in the computer simulations of complex adaptive systems (CAS) where individual agents (bit strings) interact and follow changing and unpredictable patterns. Stacey and colleagues carefully suggest how some relationships in human interaction can be seen as *analogous* to relationships in CAS and how this informs our understanding of the complex nature of human life. Some of the key features are that persons interact locally through complex responsive processes of relating (speech, gestures, body language); what emerges is population-wide narrative-like patterns such as themes in conversations; novelty as repatterning of conversational themes; predictable and

unpredictable human interaction; and creation and destruction developed because of the non-linear interactions where small deviations are amplified (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 325).

The term *complex adaptive systems* is replaced with *complex responsive processes* because humans do not *adapt*, but rather *respond* bodily to each other, and humans are not part of *systems*, but involved in continuous *processes*. In the complex responsive process thinking, there is no programmer or manager directing the patterning of our ways of interacting, and there is no 'whole', no boundaries, as our interactions are continuously patterning and eventually involve those close to us as well as those in the wider society.

In the rather depressing project office described earlier I might have experienced complex and dynamic micro-interactions between two people inside a meeting room, but these would have been influenced by (and would have influenced at the same time) the unpredictable patterns of other colleagues' communication, needs and intentions, the aggressive general director's hidden agendas, the strategies of the IFI, the staff in the office, my old colleague, Mikkel, and other agents' personal wishes or strategies.

Stacey says: 'individual mind is the actions of a body directed toward itself while social is the action of bodies directed toward each other in paradoxical processes of continuity and potential transformation at the same time' (2003: 17). Therefore, the theory of complex responsive processes is a theory of *action*, and, in this perspective, action is patterns of interaction which are not thought of as systems but as activities of humans iterated over time (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 335–336). Stacey and Mowles emphasise how thinking in this way directs attention to actual lived experience rather than generalisations, systems, or tools:

> We argue that a perspective along these lines forms a coherent way of thinking that directs attention to the narrative forms of human experience. The focus is on lived experience in local situations in the present, paying particular attention to the diversity of relationships within which individual and organisational identities emerge. The practical implication of such a move is that we focus attention directly on patterns of human relating and ask what kind of power relations, ideology and communication they reflect.
>
> (ibid: 336)

I illustrate this by the example from the narrative where I describe how Juan and I had differences in our understanding of good financial management:

> Juan turned out the pockets of his shoulder bag, displaying a staggering amount of U.S. dollars and local currency on his desk; these were the project finances and our cash balance. I stared in disbelief, feeling that somehow something was not under control. Juan explained that we did not use our bank account as this would incur a negative interest. And no, we did not have a safe. I was not impressed at all and I told him so.

In this sequence, I note how some of the complex aspects mentioned there are at play: The *local interaction* as the verbal and non-verbal communication between Juan and me; played out *as a lived experience in a local situation in the present* which for both of us was an experience of pasts (cash management) and concerns about the next days ('… something was not under control'). This in turn shaped both our *individual and organisational identities* (practical manager versus responsible manager of the company). The non-linear interactions of our ways of perceiving good cash management where *small deviations were amplified* ('… stared in disbelief …'), eventually leading to Juan's dismissal. We experienced how the power balance between us shifted, allowing an emergent *narrative form of human experience* of proper cash management, a narrative of how, for instance, I and my colleagues as well as our superiors frown upon such an approach to project management.

I here draw attention to how all the different aspects of the complex processes are at play at the same time as we try to unpick them to enhance our understanding of what is emerging. I also emphasise that 'complex processes' is not a phenomenon related to particularly 'complex projects' but is simply what is continuously experienced in our daily lives in our daily micro-interactions.

The implications for my own practice are, therefore, that in my daily work as a project manager or team leader I increasingly observe how these complex processes are played out and how I am an integral part of them. I suggest that acting is not something undertaken by me as team leader but is rather a complex pattern of interaction between several and eventually numerous agents. I do not deny responsibility for my actions, but

I am increasingly aware of how these are developing in relation to others. I suggest that any leader will benefit from paying attention to the multiple micro-interactions that take place in our daily organisational life as an understanding that these may increase one's level of awareness and ability to manoeuvre in the ever-emerging processes.

This explication of the unpredictable complex processes involved in the action inevitably raises the question of what had happened to the plans, objectives and time schedules such as those carefully laid out for my intervention – had they been filed on a shelf or even thrown out of the window? Well, not necessarily.

I recall how I over the years have tried to convince my colleagues that, even if our well-prepared strategies with detailed actions were usually sitting on a shelf, what really counted was the process of making them; my experience is that they do inspire us but are usually not pursued in detail as we eventually move on to undertake the actions that we find are useful to us. I find that the thinking of the philosophy of pragmatism described next helps me to acknowledge this way of understanding acting.

Acting with 'end-in-view'

The American pragmatist John Dewey introduces the concept of 'end-in-view' to describe the role of goals in the ongoing series of actions (1958/ 2013: 161) and speaks about the reciprocal relationship between an action's means and the end. He suggests that we do not just fix our gaze on a distant theoretical goal but rather maintain it as an 'end-in-view' as we are engaged with our actions here and now. In the narrative earlier, I refer to how we followed a client to a new region, even though it was not planned, with the sense that something might develop; I travelled to take over project management even though that was not part of my personal plans, but I realised in the moment that it could be an interesting challenge. In our dialogue in the project office, I was uncertain what would be the next step and I describe the flow of gestures and responses and how we were not sure where these would take us and when, although I had some sense of where we were heading.

Hans Joas describes how meaning is derived from lived experience in which humans engage with their environments on a continuous basis. He refers to Dewey and states:

> Only when we recognise that certain means are available to us do we dis-
> cover goals which had not occurred to us before. Thus, means not only
> specify goals, but they also expand the scope for possible goal-setting.
> 'Ends-in-view' are not, therefore, vaguely conceived future situations, but
> concrete plans of action which serve to structure present action.
>
> (1996/2005: 154)

In this, the pragmatists' approach, 'it is not sufficient to consider human action as being *contingent* on the situation, but it should also be recognized that the situation is *constitutive* of action' (Joas, 1996/2005: 160, emphasis in original). The creativity lies in the process of acting – not in the achieved goal.

As an example, I here recognise what contemporary scholar Heape refers to from an innovation workshop where he describes how one of the participants said, 'I am on to something but I'm not quite sure what'. Heape states that the important point here is that he and his participants had shifted from wanting '… to know it all before making a move, to a position where they were able to rest in the understanding that the some-thing they had glimpsed in their inquiry was enough for them to act on and move forward with' (Heape 2014: 189). Thus, it would be 'good enough for now', as would be expressed by the pragmatists.

I suggest that the ability to move forward based on 'what we know for now' into something unknown has become an important aspect for me as a leader. Dewey emphasises how action changes a situation and creatively opens new opportunities and new goals – even if these paradoxically are not known or acknowledged at an early stage. I have increasingly realised how in difficult, uncertain or complex situations, where I do not know exactly what is the way forward (or the eventual outcome), just the mere process of starting to do something by reading, writing, calling or entering into a discussion can change my perception of the process as well as the goal.

Therefore, we always act *into* a situation, says Dewey, and our reaction cannot be seen as a linear, causal process. In contrast, our communication with other humans, our acting, is part of a perpetual and iterative pro-cess. In a seminal article, Dewey critiques the (then) classic understanding of a linear relationship between stimulus, sensation, and response and his suggestion is that one's response depends on how the situation is perceived in light of one's previous experience.

> ... the so-called response is not merely to the stimulus; it is, so to speak, *into* it.
>
> (Dewey, 1896/1982: 264, emphasis in original)

Dewey uses the example of a child reaching for a burning candle and points to how the initial perception of the stimulus is dependent on, for instance, the child's previous experience of something exciting or something dangerous. By raising the arm, focusing on the flame, and reaching out the child may start appreciating the danger and excitement and will also study the flame in more detail. The response is thus changing the perception of the flame – it acts *into* the stimulus – and vice versa.

When my director and I discussed solutions for our far-away project, the conversation increasingly spurred my interest to take over the project management myself, i.e. I changed my perception of the project – or rather how I was part of that process. A traditional view may be that I would make my own rational analysis and decision before (or during) the meeting but what Dewey points to is the experience that one's sense of the stimulus is changing as we start acting into it. Many of us have experienced how, when we make a personal speech, for instance, we are moved by the object of our speech and the reactions of the audience and we may change our words or our way of presenting them.

Dewey gives the example of hearing an unexpected noise:

> If one is reading a book, if one is hunting, if one is watching in a dark place on a lonely night, if one is performing a chemical experiment, in each case, the noise has a very different mental value; it is a different experience.
>
> (ibid: 266)

We are thus not listening passively to raw input. Listening is an activity and it is our acting that determines the character of the stimuli that we experience.

> Neither mere sensation, nor mere movement, can ever be either stimulus or response; only an act can be that.
>
> (ibid: 266)

What Dewey is telling us, I believe, is that the mere act of doing something will change one's perception of a situation and the ongoing process. This

is in stark contrast to the Kantian understanding of a rational teleology mentioned earlier where one must be able to determine the goal in advance and the way to reach it.

In my consultancy practice I have frequently experienced how the objectives for our assignments may be described well and after initial discussions and planning, the team members move on to take up their individual tasks and some dedicated team members become concerned about being able to fulfil the numerous tasks bulleted in the extensive scope of work given by the client. However, we all realise how it is worthwhile to have a constant dialogue about what we try to achieve and how we do it – also with the client. We experience that our understanding of the objectives often changes somewhat, the work becomes more qualified and we often find that some tasks may become redundant whereas others become increasingly important.

In the 1990s, a good consultant was supposed to give the client the perfect solutions, whereas in more recent times, in our kind of business, the mantra has been to listen carefully to the client's needs and try to fulfil these. I suggest that as consultants and leaders we will also need to embrace Dewey's position that while the objectives may be kept in view, we will be well served by engaging with the immediate actions and acknowledge how they form our perception of what needs to be done. Both the client and the consultants may see new opportunities and ways forward.

When Dewey introduces the concept of 'end-in-view' he brings to our attention that our understanding of goals in a distant future are *anticipations* that we make based on our *present* situation and *present* view of the world. In doing so, Dewey points to the temporal structure of action, how the past as well as the future influences our experience of what we are doing right now. In the following I will develop this understanding further as I argue that we act into a 'living present'.

Acting into the 'living present'

Stacey and colleagues refer to the 'living present' (Shaw, 2002; Stacey et al., 2000) which indicates that the present is influenced by one's past experience as well as expectations for the future.

In the narrative I describe elements of past experience such as handling project cash, working in sub-optimal office conditions and my relationship with my old, trusted colleague, Mikkel. I also describe the unpleasant

experience of walking someone out of the door which did not seem right at the time. The past also entails what has happened moments before the present, meaning that micro-interactions on the day between Juan, Mikkel, other staff and me became elements of the past in a continuous process. At the same time, Juan and others' sense of past would also have an impact on how our dialogue developed in a complex manner into a pattern that led to his dismissal.

Similarly, the present was influenced by the future by my concern about taking over a complex project in a field in which I had limited expertise, a concern about the client's upcoming monitoring mission, insufficient budget for the whole project period and uncertainty about the next reports due within four weeks. Similarly, the future included the immediate hand-ling of working with Juan, his imminent dismissal and my subsequent meeting with the office staff. I note how I 'needed to find out', 'did not yet have enough knowledge', 'next day I would speak to him'.

In my deliberations in the project office, I did not go through the pasts and the future in a structured manner (although I continuously tried). The reiteration of past and future in the living present develops perpetually as a fractal process (Stacey et al., 2000: 36). By this I mean that the processes and experience from long ago fuse with those from a few minutes earlier as they appear in the present and engage my mind in an unorganised and integrated flow of thoughts, which feels very far from a 'rational' train of thought and decision-making process.

In this paradoxical and iterative way, when we are acting, speculations about the future influence our perception of the past and vice versa, and we cannot think of the present as a dimensionless dot in a linear flow of time (Shaw, 2002: 46). For example, it may be a fact of the past that I boarded a certain aircraft at a certain time but my perception of how I experienced the flight is not in the past – it is a process in my mind right now, in the present. And this interpretation of the past will continuously evolve.

Taking this idea further, I draw on Mead who suggests that we tend to interpret the past in a manner that allows us 'intelligent conduct to proceed' into the future.

> The implication of my position is that the past is such a construction that the reference that is found in it is not to events having a reality inde-pendent of the present which is the seat of reality, but rather to such an

interpretation of the present in its conditioning passage as will enable intelligent conduct to proceed. It is of course evident that the materials out of which that past is constructed lie in the present.

(1932/2002: 57)

Thus, the American pragmatists' position is that truth or knowledge is not what best represents a given world, but what works for us when we pursue our collective aims and interests. This does not mean that we are not truthful but that we inevitably interpret our experience based on the context in which we find ourselves. As a project manager I have in the past tried to draw upon lessons learned from other projects as well as my own experience and also realised how I felt being on uncertain ground when I could not identify and replicate useful ways of acting. I have increasingly come to acknowledge, based on the perspective of complex responsive processes, that in our leadership we act to the best of our ability, knowing well that we act into an uncertain future and with a perception of the past that is constantly evolving in the social interaction.

This leads to the further important observation that time has a direction, as I will now go on to explore.

Time has a direction

When we posit that our perception of the past, present and future is continuously evolving it also indicates that time has a direction, meaning that we cannot move backwards. For example, the moment I asked Juan to leave the office, it could not be unsaid. This was an emerging process where my perception of the situation and my personal feelings were continuously changing, a process where there was no way of going back. I reflect on how, in my management roles, I have often hesitated to act, in order to seek consensus, ensure that I made the 'right' decision, confirm that no one was upset, and so on. I now wonder if this can be related to an understanding arising from rational teleology, namely a wish to be able to backtrack, to be able to undo what has been done and also to predict the outcome in advance. I suggest that we have been brought up with the dominant, systemic way of understanding management and organisations where we always have an unconscious expectation that everything can be calculated in advance – and changed if it does not work.

The Belgian scientist and Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine describes time's unidirectionality as the 'arrow of time' (1997). Based on his research of non-linear processes within thermodynamics, he states that our way of perceiving the world has been based largely on classical, reversible mechanical physics in which 'Time is simply a bookkeeping parameter without any direction' (Prigogine and Antoniou, 2003: 22). He posits that nature develops in an irreversible way (Prigogine, 1997: 2–7) and describes bifurcation points in thermodynamics, critical points at which processes may change into one or more different paths, which means that the process cannot move backwards, a phenomenon that Prigogine argues has analogies in human societies (2003: 20).

The development of the perspective of complex responsive processes is also inspired by Prigogine. Stacey says:

> We can only go forward in time and elaborate on what we have said or done. It is also our experience that interaction with each other in one way immediately precludes all alternative ways of interacting and that what happens next will be different from what might have been if we had interacted in one of these alternative ways. This is analogous to the bifurcations of the nonlinear dynamics.
>
> (2003: 67)

The path dependency means that we can never go back from the present viewpoint to a past one. Complexity theory may help us to illustrate how differences occur and cannot be backtracked. Stacey refers to the unpredictability in the complex processes of human interaction which may display differences based on values, history or other:

> It is because of the potential for small differences to escalate that we cannot retrace our steps. In other words, it is because time has the structure of the living present that we also experience the arrow of time.
>
> (2011: 320)

Prigogine and Stacey's arguments are here supported by the French philosopher Henri Bergson who engages himself with the *qualitative* sense of time, called 'durée' (1913/2005). He argues that time, say in a decision-making process, cannot be illustrated as a geometrical figure: 'If I glance over a road marked on the map and follow it up to a certain point, there is nothing to

prevent my turning back and trying to find out whether it branches off anywhere. But time is not a line along which one can pass again' (ibid: 181).

What I find important in Bergson's philosophy is that actions cannot be undone because the qualitative, sensational experience of what has happened cannot be unexperienced. In the project office mentioned earlier, I could theoretically have changed my mind moments later and asked Juan to stay on the project, however, this would not take away the quale, the emotional experience, that both he and I (or others) had been through – thus the process could not be reversed even if we kept working together.

As mentioned, I suggest that when some of us hesitate to take the next steps, it is often because we are unconsciously looking for ways of moving forward that have an in-built option to step back again, if needed, and we are concerned that we do not know the future. I increasingly acknowledge that I can never know what will emerge but also (in Dewey's words) how action into uncertainty may change a situation and creatively present new opportunities and new goals. I do not suggest that *not knowing* what will happen is particularly helpful, but as I focus less on what we *could* have done, I find that I turn my attention to opportunities instead.

In the processes described, a leader will very often experience how they are continuously torn between being personally involved in the messy, complex process around themselves while at the same sensing a need to observe these processes and maintain the overview. This feeling can be frustrating and overwhelming, but one has to do both at the same time. This is indeed a paradox, which I will discuss next.

The paradox of being part of a process

Classic management theories consider the powerful few who can be objective, at times detached, from implementation, being able to observe and influence the process. As a project manager I do try to influence the process by finding the 'way of moving forward'. In the project office I did try to take a step back and get an overview of the project while Juan and other colleagues were working around me, and I did try to detach myself somewhat to be able to build my mental models – be able to understand what was going on. Clearly, it was impossible to maintain that detachment.

To be involved and detached at the same time may be experienced as an unresolvable paradox. By paradox I understand 'the presence together,

at the same time, of self-contradictory, mutually constituting, essentially conflicting ideas, neither of which can be eliminated or resolved' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 39). A manager's role can be echoed in the metaphor of evolutionary change as a stream (Griffin, 2002: 13). In the project office I was not 'looking at a stream from the bank' as a detached observer; neither was I 'steering a canoe on a stream', facing challenges and resolving dilemmas by retaining the balance. I rather felt that I was part of the stream where I had no clear bearings and where I was caught up in the generation of forward movement. I was observing and involved, in Griffin's words 'at the same time'. I understand his metaphor in the way that one will not want to fight against the stream, but rather accept and embrace the paradox – to be part of the stream and move the best way possible. Griffin states:

> Holding this sense of *at the same time* is to become aware of key paradoxes and it remains uncomfortable. The very essence of such paradoxes is that they do not settle down to a resolution.
>
> (ibid: 13, emphasis in original)

The German philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel developed the understanding that consciousness arises from our paradoxical ability to be both the subject and object of our own thinking (Mowles, 2015). He describes, for example, how the concept of *being* in reality cannot be appreciated without the opposite, the concept of *nothing*. This means that both concepts integrate their opposites. What I am then looking for is the ability to reconcile the sense of understanding from a distance with the experience of being an integral part of the process.

> Hegel argued that the reconciliation occurs not through a cancelling out, but through the preservation of the contradiction in a higher order, a higher unity, which in turn provokes another contradiction. Hegel's term for this is *Aufhebung*, the unity in difference ...
>
> (ibid: 21, emphasis in original)

For me, this is a profound insight as I, as project manager or team leader or in any other leadership role, increasingly have accepted and acknowledged the *Aufhebung*, in this case the sense of being 'both at the same time' a continuous sense of tension which can never be resolved but stays with me as one integrated sense of being present in and aware of the process at the

same time. It is an acknowledgement of the paradox in my role which at the same time also defines the role and which may, I believe, energise the process of acting.

Concluding remarks – implications for leaders

I have presented a narrative from a project where I, as a project manager, travelled abroad to take action and replace a team leader. Even though I planned the steps from home I experienced a somewhat unplanned, complex and at times messy process where I was also concerned about my own ability to move the project safely into the unknown future. I do not discuss whether my action was right or wrong – I just describe a lived experience which I attempt to analyse through a process perspective to understand better what is involved in the acting. This has led me to four main observations.

First, I see acting in our daily project work as evolving themes and patterns of gestures and responses between colleagues, clients and others, rather than as a linear activity undertaken by an individual. I find that the theory of complex responsive processes helps me to pay attention to the detailed micro-interactions that continuously evolve between my colleagues and me and also provides me with a sense that one can never know what the next step will bring.

Second, I have come to appreciate the pragmatists' perspective of observing ends-in-view rather than just fixed future goals. This allows us as managers to focus on the means available to us and appreciate how new opportunities may present themselves. I increasingly acknowledge how the mere act of doing something presents new perspectives in my work – an explication of Dewey's position that we act *into* a situation.

Third, I find that an understanding of temporality makes me appreciate how history is part of every action we take; how an apparently well-thought-through action in a project is influenced by evolving, flickering recollections of the past as well as hopes for the future. In particular, I note how my appreciation of the arrow of time influences my concern about acting into an unknown future. I have increasingly accepted that I cannot foresee all the next steps and that I cannot expect to be able to backtrack. In a paradoxical way I find that this acceptance has made me more willing to step into the unknown.

Fourth, I find it useful to acknowledge that as a manager one will always experience the paradoxical sense of being part of a complex process while at the same time wanting to observe it and get an overview. Such paradoxes do not settle down to a resolution and as a manager I have increasingly accepted the tension of being 'both/and' at 'the same time' rather than fighting against it. I find that this insight strengthens my ability to act and work from a sometimes very fluid position.

In summary, observing a complexity perspective allows me, I believe, to better absorb and understand the myriad complex interactions and emerging patterns of activity in our daily work. I find it useful to reflect on what I see and what I sense, and I can indeed appreciate the need to act where in reality I do not know what the outcome of the next action will be. I suggest that from a complex responsive process way of thinking, management skills and competencies lie in how effectively managers and leaders participate in those processes and are able to act into uncertainty.

Note

1   This chapter presents work that was first explored in the author's 2017 doctoral thesis entitled 'Acting into the living present: taking account of complexity and uncertainty when leading consultancy teams in international water projects' available at https://doi.org/10.18745/th.19620

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4

LEADERSHIP AS INQUIRY

RHYTHM ANALYSIS AS A RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY IDEALISATIONS OF FREEDOM

Rikke Horup

Introduction[1]

The crisis of leadership globally partly arises out of the way it is idealised and misconceived. In this chapter, I take a paradoxical perspective on the individual and social to explore the struggles for freedom and agency within the practice of leadership. The chapter centres on how leadership tends to be based on dualistic approaches and idealisations that seem to overlook the ambiguity involved in the emergence of leadership practice.

As an associate professor in the Department of Leadership at the University College of Copenhagen, my job entails multiple assignments: research, teaching and various consultancy jobs. All these tasks centre around the theme of leadership since the students and clients I work with all carry leadership positions within the Danish public sector. Meanwhile, I often also think of my own practices within these processes in terms of taking a temporary leadership position. In my collaboration with leaders, the aim is often to enable new leadership practices and find agency in the complex organisational environments we navigate. The idea of agency has,

in my experience, often been considered an individual challenge. Our sense of freedom to interact with cultural and structural constraints has been perceived from the viewpoint of a dichotomy between the leader and the social context in which they interact. I and the managers I work with are often left with ambivalent feelings and a lack of agency in situations when we feel stuck as we try to find our way through everyday organisational life with its ambiguities and contradictory expectations.

A common dualism is a distinction between leaders and followers, which is regarded as problematic and concerning by some scholars (Collinson, 2005: 1435) since it prevents us from acknowledging the blurry, multiple, ambiguous and contradictory character of power relations in which identities emerge (ibid). Alvesson and Kärreman argue that even theories that move away from the assumptions of the heroic leader use a broad attribution of faith in an idealised idea of positive forms of leadership outcomes, such as harmony, effectiveness and moral order (2016: 142) and by doing so marginalise what is not so good within the practice of leadership. Other scholars advocate that even with the movement away from a heroic leader, most theories about leadership emphasise a paradigm of the charismatic leader, where leadership can offer a way out of present organisational problems because it remains unaffected by the organisation (Spoelstra, 2019: 3). In addition, Mowles argues how the dominant theories of managerial intervention within an organisation are based on system dynamics assuming that organisations are self-regulating, while the manager is a detached, objective observer, who can intervene to help the followers bring about the necessary change (2011: 31). In this chapter, I oppose these dichotomies in my efforts to inquire into a new understanding of the processes of negotiating freedom from a dialectical perspective.

I explore Collinson's approach to the dialectics of leadership, in which he highlights a paradoxical relationship between managers and organisations and a need to explore how subjectivities are being negotiated to understand further the complexity of these processes (2005: 1435). In this chapter, the idea of leadership as unaffected by the history, culture and politics of the organisation will be challenged, with the aim of inquiring into the emergence of leadership as identities both being formed by and forming the social. In this sense, individual and social processes are paradoxically intertwined, which challenges both the idea that the degree of freedom can

be understood as determined by each leader individually, and the idea that leaders are without agency with the society.

This exploration of leadership and freedom is inspired by Hegel's dialectical understanding of the relationship between self and others. In an attempt to re-actualise Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1820), Axel Honneth draws attention to Hegel's idea of free will in terms of "being with oneself in another" (Honneth, 2000: 27). He states how the understanding of free will can be compared to friendship, where we willingly limit ourselves in recognition of others and elaborates: "in order for the will to be able to will itself as free, it must limit itself to those of its needs, desires and drives …" (2000: 16). In this sense, he points to the dialectical relation between the individual and the social. When individuals limit themselves to recognise others, they must find ways of doing this without sacrificing their own interests or identity, which addresses a paradoxical relation between freedom and limitation. Honneth argues that Hegel presents a social understanding of freedom based on an unlimited "experience of self" and a strong sense of others. He states that losing this paradox comes with the risk of getting lost in either oneself or the other, which means humans can suffer from indeterminacy due to being self-involved and lose the sense of others by not recognising one's needs or the needs of others. He underlines the interdependence between people and understands freedom as determinate indeterminacy or indeterminate determinacy when arguing, "freedom is to will something determinate, yet to be with oneself in this determinacy and to return once more to the universal" (2000: 26).

Equally, from a pragmatist perspective, the "application of dualisms, which are pairs of irreducible and excluding principles, precludes any understanding of the dynamics of processes because they cut through the very temporal continuities from which processes are constituted" (Simpson and Marshall, 2010: 354). I suggest a paradoxical approach where "one concept calls out for its opposite which is both defined and negated by it" (Mowles, 2015: 33) is a more helpful way of understanding freedom and constraint, relationally negotiated as ongoing possibilities to interact freely with the fact that we are paradoxically both enabling/disabling each other.

This perspective emphasises how freedom is inextricably linked to constraint, but how do these processes simultaneously enable and constrain the emergence of leadership carried out in everyday organisational life? And what kinds of conditions enable leaders to find the freedom to

manoeuvre when accepting the interdependency between the individual leader and the social environment? To inquire into these questions, I will present a short narrative from my practice followed by analysis. I draw on George Herbert Mead's work to understand the radically social character of human nature from a paradoxical perspective and its implications for how leadership emerges in everyday organisational life. Next, I turn to Henri Lefebvre's perspective on rhythm analysis to explore the emerging enabling and constraining within leadership practice. Finally, I use Hartmut Rosa's analysis of the contemporary character of human relationships to suggest how elements of modernity might be a stumbling block in the struggles for freedom within leadership.

Developing collaborative leadership in a Danish municipality

Working as an associate professor at the University College of Copenhagen, I sometimes take the role of an external consultant focusing on leadership in different organisations. As noted above, I consider this part of my practice a temporary form of leadership (Mowles, 2009). On this occasion, I was invited into a one-day seminar with a group of managers from a Danish municipality. The Danish government had introduced new legislation that obliged the municipalities to closely coordinate the different initiatives taken around socially challenged young citizens. According to the project manager from the municipality, this goal required a closer collaboration between their different departments, and they wanted to start with a cross-organisational group of managers to develop their ability to collaborate.

   We met at a community centre by the sea in Copenhagen. Afterwards the group of managers was going to go on a boat trip in the harbour and share supper. My initial task during the day was to share my knowledge about what possibilities and difficulties the managers might face with this ambition and facilitate a dialogue between them. I liked their ambition of paying attention to collaboration and at the same time, I found that they seemed to idealise the concept of working together as the great solution to organisational challenges. At times, I did not hesitate to present a rather provocative perspective, focusing on the ambiguities, disagreements and challenging conflicts that might or might not be involved in collaboration across contexts. I shared the view that different

educational backgrounds also meant contradictory perspectives in my experience, and we discussed how they usually handled these differences. I did not present any solutions, which I would normally feel was required from an external consultant. The presentation led to reflexive dialogues, where the managers explored their practice and the contradictory elements they experienced in their everyday organisational life. They talked about how strong identities within the specific communities, e.g. the schools, enabled them to focus on a task. However, the narrow perspective on the sector-specific tasks and their belonging to a specific unit constrained the co-ordination between different departments and their different tasks around the socially exposed young citizens. They paid attention to each other and questioned what challenges each of them was facing. They realised that their wish to develop a collaborative leadership practice should be considered as an ongoing process.

Subsequently, I was invited to plan a process that could support their ambitions for the next year. Based on our shared experience from the one-day seminar, I described a process where the central part of it was to continue to engage in reflexive dialogues about their ongoing collaboration experience. We were to meet every six weeks and continue the conversations we started.

More leaders attended the second meeting. It seemed that the group of managers I had initially met had realised how collaboration with further departments was important to them, and how they were dependent on even more colleagues in the development of co-ordinated efforts. For example, involving leaders from each school district in the municipality seemed important for working with vulnerable young citizens. This time we met at the district council meeting room with paintings of the former mayors on the wall and microphones in each place. A sense of formality and tradition arose in me, and as the participants entered, they talked and laughed in what I perceived as expressions of anxiety. As if pressured by a huge sense of responsibility, I suddenly felt tense, which made me question the process. What if all this reflexivity would lead to absolutely no change at all?

The project manager presented the strategic perspectives about collaboration, and I presented the aim of the process. Then I facilitated smaller group conversations about what they found important to engage in during this year-long process with one another. Later I presented some of my own perspectives on the challenges of collaborating across contexts, such as challenges to existing identities resulting from

collaboration with a wider community – most of it was similar to my presentation at the earlier meeting. I divided them into small groups to reflect together, followed by a plenary dialogue based on the different group conversations. Even though I thought it was more or less the same task as it was at the first one-day seminar, it became a completely different experience. I found it difficult to find my way into the small groups and felt like an outsider unable to participate in their dialogues, which made me wait for the plenary. The responses which the groups presented were, from my perspective, instrumental wishes about creating a digital communication system as the answer to all their problems and the participants did not in any way engage in what I thought of as reflexivity. They seemed to suggest quick fixes, which I found myself writing down as suggestions, while strongly but silently rejecting these as a way to move on. With hindsight, I see how I was caught up with my own vulnerability and the sense of not creating a reflexive community as I promised. My fear of how reflexivity would lead to no change was reinforced with the experience that we could not even engage reflexively with each other.

Several of the comments seemed to position me as the single person responsible for what was going on, for example, when they asked if they were not doing it right or pointed out that the slides about strategy should have been in larger writing. I tried to resist the pressure to take the role of the independent and single responsible consultant or leader of the process. However, I found how I felt disappointed with the participants' lack of reflexivity. I did not share this feeling with them but found how I felt unsuccessful, and that I wasn't living up to the ambition of creating a reflexive community as we had planned. At the end of the meeting, I found it hard to even listen to the presentations from the groups since I was caught up with a need to perform in order to meet the goals of reflexivity. On my journey home, I was puzzled by what had been going on and how this process, with only a few new participants, left me feeling extremely limited and disciplined in ways I did not like and in which I could not see myself. The interaction at this meeting was so different from my earlier meeting with these managers; my leading emerged in unexpected ways that I disliked. I was curious about what had been going on and how we would be able to move on together.

So, what can we learn from this narrative about how leadership is exercised as an interdependent practice from the paradoxical perspective on selves

and others and with the understanding that freedom is a process of being simultaneously enabled and constrained in our interaction with others? And further, how can leaders negotiate their sense of freedom if we are never liberated from relational disciplining? I'll begin with exploring how a paradoxical relation between self and others can be understood.

Selves as paradoxically being formed by and forming the social

The work of George Herbert Mead (1934) reflects an ongoing inquiry into the emerging self that draws on the Hegelian understanding that selves only exist in relation to other selves. Importantly, in the Hegelian perspective, thesis and antithesis do not necessarily turn into synthesis, and this is core to Mead's understanding of communication, which he characterises as an ongoing spiral of processes of gesture and response, where every gesture leads to a response, which again is seen as another gesture back. Mead argues that this involves the anticipation and perception of the attitudes of others. His concept of "the generalised other" as the generalised attitudes or tendencies to act, which have evolved historically and which are always implicated in human interaction (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 366) explains how communication with both ourselves and others takes the anticipated response into account. As such, communication plays a central part in the processes of forming selves and meaning.

In this way, the communicative process at the two meetings in the narrative evoked different gestures and responses, and I see now how I was as much a part of this as anybody else, since undoubtedly, I also gestured differently and thus called out different responses. Mead emphasises how the response of others to a certain gesture depends on the different life stories of particular others, which means that we can never know the meaning of our own gestures until we experience the response we get. This response might therefore vary from one individual to another and from one situation to another (Mead, 1934: 47).

As leaders, we might think we have established a specific relation to others. However, this perspective underlines that even when leaders think we have found a successful formula for something, we cannot simply hold the assumption of scaling up by just doing more of the same and with more people. The experience of enabling a reflexive dialogue between the leaders

at the first meeting in the narrative did not repeat itself in the next meeting, even with many of the same people. Our idea of doing more of the same seems to have been punctured since more is also different, as seen in this narrative. Therefore, leaders must stay open and inquire spontaneously into the responses we receive and then again find our own response to these gestures. The negotiations of what leadership is about were played out in different ways at the two meetings, and the interweaving of intentions made leadership emerge in very different ways.

Mead's conception of communication particularly emphasises the temporal aspects of gesturing and responding between human bodies. In the narrative, other factors also seemed to be important, so how else might we elaborate on our understanding of these processes? To further explore the changing character of our interventions, I turn to the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who argues for the importance of paying attention to rhythms created by navigating time and space in everyday life.

Rhythms of freedom in leadership

Lefebvre, like Mead, takes the temporal aspects of everyday life seriously and argues for a dialectical approach to the entanglements between time and space, which he connects with an understanding of a relational perspective on mind and body and the repeating and changing rhythms with which people engage. He emphasises how rhythm is not to be confused with movement and states that "we tend to attribute to rhythms a mechanical overtone, brushing aside the organic aspect of rhythmed movements" (Lefebvre, 1992/2019: 16). In this way, he opposes the idea that repetition excludes difference but argues that repetitions give birth to difference. Through this process, he points to the contradictory elements of rhythms, not only as coexisting but also as mutual prerequisites. In this way, he "seeks to grasp a moving but determinate complexity" (ibid: 21) and introduces the idea of *polyrhythmia*, indicating how different rhythms tend to be played out at the same time.

While paying attention to temporalities and their relations within wholes, he is simultaneously interested in the role of space. In this way, he argues how the rhythm analyst should be capable of listening and watching the temporal aspects of gestures and responses but also where they take place, whether in a house, a street, a town, etc. He does not isolate an

object, subject or relation. However, he argues how a rhythm analyst should draw on all his senses such as breathing, heartbeats, delivery of speech as landmarks in our way of participating in polyrhythmia. In this sense, he states how a rhythm analyst:

> will not be obliged to jump from the inside to the outside of observed bodies; he should come to listen to them as a whole and unify them by taking his own rhythms as a reference by integrating the outside with the inside.
>
> <div align="right">(ibid: 30)</div>

Lefebvre is, therefore, offering a way of inquiring into the ongoing rhythmed movements of everyday life. It supplements the idea of people interacting with different intentions, varying according to how they respond to the intentions of others (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 316), and seeks to grasp a further complexity of what is going on between people. Focusing on time and space, as well as mind and body, helps us to explore this complexity. Even though Lefebvre did not direct his attention to organisations, these ideas about entanglements are helpful in our efforts to understand the changing character of interactions in organisational life as well. Taking the perspective of the rhythm analyst in the two meetings in the municipality draws my attention to my own leadership practice.

Noticing rhythms of time: Thinking of time makes me realise how my role had changed. At the first meeting, I was invited to give a presentation and facilitate conversations about collaborative leadership. Because it was one day only, I did not pay attention to any ongoing relation to the participants and was less concerned about what they might or might not think of me. Before the next meeting, I agreed to work with them for the next year to engage in reflexive dialogues. Even though I thought we could continue our conversations from the first meeting, the rhythm changed already before our conversations on the second day began.

Noticing rhythms of space: For me, stepping into the formal room in the second meeting was related to tradition and a sense of hierarchy and formal conversation because of the pictures on the wall and the microphones at each place. Combined with the larger number of participants, I wonder whether this spatial influence was perceived as less intimate than the community centre by the sea and therefore less inviting for people to share

their more vulnerable reflections. I see now how a more traditional way of thinking about leadership, as the detached and responsible individual, emerged and how I myself was caught up by this understanding while at the same time trying to resist it. When the participants entered the room, the tense laughing might have been a sign of anxiety and uncertainty about this spatial environment – a parallel process to what I experienced when I first entered the room.

Noticing rhythms of bodies: Including new people also means inviting in new intentions. However, at the same time, the interweaving of intentions between the "old" participants might also have been different on this second day. Listening closely to the loud laughing in the beginning and sensing my difficulties in negotiating my way into the smaller group conversations, makes me think about how others could have experienced similar problems with negotiating their way into relations with each other. Instead of exploring these ideas, I found myself preoccupied with the fact that they did not engage in the reflexive dialogues in ways I would have wished. I was caught up focusing on outcomes and found that I was delinking means and ends in my efforts to form the dialogues the way I wanted and had promised.

Lefebvre's perspective invites the rhythm analyst to bring the rhythmed movements that make themselves present within an inquiry into presence by integrating them in an ensemble full of meaning (1992/2019: 33). This means paying close attention to the emerging rhythms and the way we respond to these and maybe even inviting others to explore and get a sharper focus on these processes. Trusting your judgement on when and how to bring the present rhythms, including your own heartbeat and anxie-ties into the present and calling them into mind then becomes a central part of leading. Leadership in this sense, is then about inviting people around you to take experience seriously and to engage with whatever emerges. It requires that we can stay open to what the contemporary pragmatist philosopher Richard Bernstein (1991) calls the otherness of others and indicates how leadership is also about inquiring into the emerging present. Taking experience seriously means, from this perspective, not suppressing the otherness of others, but willingly listening and maybe seeking mutual, reciprocal understanding. Through this insight, the foundation of our iden-tity "is a fragile and temporary achievement that can always be ruptured by unexpected contingencies" (ibid: 337). Connected to the Hegelian idea of

being with oneself in another, it becomes equally important for leaders to continually relate openly, not only to others but simultaneously to oneself and to stay with the paradoxical interdependency between individual and social. Through rhythm analysis, leaders might gain a strong and nuanced sense of ourselves and the subjectification processes we are constantly negotiating. In this sense, freedom in leadership is understood as the acceptance of the work of leadership as an interdependent emergent practice.

Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, however, Bernstein also distinguishes between freedom and liberation, and states how liberation is understood as release *from* something, whereas freedom "is the positive achievement of human action and exists only as long as that public space exists in which individuals debate together and participate with each other in determining public affairs" (Bernstein, 1983: 208). Taking this approach, leadership is about participation in the ongoing negotiations, and freedom is not about an absence of constraints. However, it can be understood as the freedom *to* act in different situations and rhythms, in which we are simultaneously both enabled and constrained in leadership conduct.

If we accept the idea of the mutual interdependencies within which our leadership practice emerges, what leaders can do is share how we find ourselves caught up in present time and space. At the second meeting with the managers, I found the conversations difficult to relate to and that the instrumentalised solutions the managers came up with frustrated me. However, I tried my best to cover over this frustration. Looking back, I could have shared my experience of a change in the conversations, compared to the first meeting, how I was sitting with this and invited the managers to a shared exploration to find out how others felt. Lefebvre's perspective on rhythm analysis in the negotiation processes of the degrees of freedom leaders can experience emphasises the importance of inquiry. The negotiation depends on continuous inquiry and analysis of the present, and within this an attention to how enabling and constraining is played out, for everyone in organisations but especially leaders.

This section highlights how the rhythms in human interaction are based on time and space and emphasises the importance of continuing to inquire into the present rhythms within which the practice of leadership emerges, and the experience of freedom can be negotiated. When analysing the rhythms in the narrative from the Danish municipality, I find myself

caught up in a strong focus on outcomes and responding with impatience to a pressure to reach the goal of reflexivity. The demands for pace seem recognisable and generalisable to other contexts in my experience of everyday organisational life. Noticing such contemporary conditions then becomes an interesting part of the rhythm analysis to inquire into whatever idealisations we tend to get caught up with in our everyday organisational life. This point leads me to explore how a contemporary need for speed might affect interactions with each other. Through this process, what is our ability to experience freedom within our practice of leadership?

Acceleration as a challenge for freedom in leadership

The sense of urgency that seemed to emerge and highly influence my leadership practice in the narrative resonates with the studies of the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa. Also inspired by Hegel, Rosa (2019) provides a dialectical perspective on the individual and society when he describes social acceleration as characteristic of modernity. He argues that "The social formation of modernity is defined structurally by the fact that it is capable only of dynamic stabilisation, while its cultural program is aimed at systematically increasing the share of the world of both individuals and cultures" (ibid: 308). He claims how the basic institutions of society, which also include organisations, can only reproduce themselves in a mode of escalation. Speed has, from his perspective, become a hegemonic way of thinking about the ideal way to move on together. He argues how we are all required to move faster and faster to maintain stability and how this pace and urgency become the new normal, to which we compare the next movement.

According to Rosa, this acceleration comes with the consequence of alienation, which he describes as "a relation of relationlessness", and as situations where "subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility and thus without any inner connection" (ibid: 184). Experiencing alienation is in this sense related to a state where we experience the world as cold, rigid, repulsive and as non-responsive to the fact that people find it difficult to keep track. However, it is not only the risk of being alienated from others that is of concern. Rosa points to and addresses that the accelerated pace might lead us to think of ourselves as instruments

or resources to maintain growth or obtain fast outcomes. In this way, we risk being alienated from ourselves.

It is important to note that these observations are not necessarily unique to contemporary society. In 1934, the pragmatist John Dewey also described how pace seems to be hollowing out the possibility of focusing on our shared experience. He states:

> Zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person, especially in this hurried and impatient human environment in which we live, with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface. No one experience has a chance to complete itself because something else is entered upon so speedily. What is called experience becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name. Resistance is treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection.
>
> (Dewey, 1934: 46)

I understand Dewey here as inviting us to reflect upon whatever emerges in the present – a reflection that might be under pressure by the idealisation of pace in organisational life. Rosa emphasises how the demand for pace has accelerated and combined with, for example, the understanding of humans as resources, this might lead to alienation.

If, as I have argued, the experience of freedom within leadership is highly dependent on paying close attention to the ongoing rhythms between self and others, alienation as a result of the accelerating world leaves us with a serious challenge when thinking of leadership in terms of processes of negotiating degrees of freedom. Maybe this reason is why Rosa seems to indicate that very little agency is left with the individual when he states how:

> various individually and historically manifested ways in which human beings relate to the world are controlled and determined only to a small extent – and in many respects not at all – by individuals themselves, and instead are shaped and predetermined by social conditions that all arise, solidify, and change behind their backs.
>
> (ibid: 27)

This would indicate the strong social impact that both enables and constrains the self and might result in getting lost in our habitus as Rosa implies or in "getting lost in the other", to use Hegel's terms. In my

leadership practice in the Danish municipality, getting lost in the other is a way of characterising how I found myself caught up in old habits and getting swept along by the habits of the group, for example, in my partly adopting an independent position as the detached leader who could be in control of the process.

Mead understands habits to be integrated with emotions and argues how they can be rather simple responses to stimuli as well as take more complex forms. He combines the understanding of habits with his understanding of gesture and response and argues that habits are embodied. He elaborates that "the structure of society lies in these social habits, and only in so far as we can take these social habits into ourselves can we become selves" (1936: 375). This argument accords with Collinson's position noted at the beginning of this chapter, underlining the importance of paying attention to how subjectivities are being negotiated. From a leadership perspective, this seems to reinforce the importance of continuous research into the ongoing rhythms in the process of emerging leadership practice, which again demands staying in relation to both self and others. According to Rosa, this becomes increasingly difficult with the acceleration.

So, if leaders are in danger of getting alienated from both themselves and others, the understanding of freedom *to* engage with the fact that we are both enabled and constrained at the same time must demand a need to improvise into these specific rhythms to stay in relation and insist on inviting others into relations as well. Rosa argues how neither identity nor sociality are possible in the absence of experiences of responsiveness (2019: 171). This is the foundation for his presentation of resonance as a solution to the mentioned consequences of social acceleration, which I will now go on to explore.

Resonance and reflection as an immanent part of negotiating degrees of freedom within leadership

Starting from the observation that human beings generally desire resonant relationships which existentially shape us, Rosa advocates for an ideal relationship with the social world based on resonance. In Rosa's terms, resonance includes dissonance so is not to be understood as consonance or harmony (2019: 184); rather it is a way of articulating experiences where we are both moved by the world and moving it simultaneously. Again, this

draws on the Hegelian dialectical understanding of subject and world inter-penetrating each other. Rosa emphasises a certain way of relating to both self and others since we are in danger of contributing to an increase in the acceleration if we do not remain both stable and open at the same time (ibid: 316). Therefore, with resonance, Rosa introduces a way of relating to communities based on listening and responding. He opposes resonant relationships to relations based on competition, which he refers to as a key structural element of modernity that leads to alienation (ibid: 21). Relating this to Bernstein's idea of staying radically open to "the otherness of others", as mentioned, he states how radical openness is about the ability to hold on to our beliefs, while at the same time staying dynamically open by listening and seeking mutual, reciprocal understanding (Bernstein, 1991: 337).

On this basis, I suggest that in order to participate in resonant relationships, leaders need to address and even embrace whatever emerges in our presence, including the ambiguity and dissonance involved in human relating. Part of leadership then becomes equivalent to research as an ongoing process of inquiring into the mysterious processes of human inter-action in everyday organisational life and improvising in our decisions on how to engage within these. Losing the understanding of and the approach to this mystery is what, according to Rosa, has reduced our understanding of the sociological processes in organisations and has left us with a view of others as instruments and resources. Staying radically open, however, also means that leaders must accept their own fallibility and fight the heroic understanding of the role of the leader into which they may be habitually drawn. Instead, perhaps leaders can see investigating both strangeness and familiarity of what is other and alien from a position of doubt instead of certainty (Mowles, 2012) as an important aspect of their role; this means accepting that the foundation of our identity as a leader "is a fragile and temporary achievement that can always be ruptured by unexpected contin-gencies" (Bernstein, 1991: 337).

If resonance also includes dissonance, and organisations are as a result expected to be ambiguous and paradoxical, then the idea of charismatic leaders creating ideal and harmonious organisational realities is challenged by this social understanding of leadership (Spoelstra, 2019; Moshayof, this volume; Bartle, this volume). However, the way of thinking about leadership and freedom I am suggesting, helps us to make better sense of the situations where we experience unfamiliar or even alien responses from the people we

work with as the renegotiation of our identity comes with multiple inse-curities. Since the renegotiation is closely related to our social interaction, leaders' identities are also related to other people's judgement and valid-ation of us and from Mead's perspective on our anticipation of these other's evaluation of our identity (1934: 176). Challenging or even disrupting the accepted social understandings, therefore, comes with the risk of exclu-sion from some of the groups by which we are judged. Therefore, I am not necessarily encouraging leaders to disrupt the social understandings of leadership to gain a sense of freedom, explore how they are enabled and constrained by them and improvise into how they can and want to prac-tise leadership within these patterns. Rather, my argument is that when we think about freedom *from* social constraints, this involves a break in our rela-tion to others. In contrast, the perspective of the freedom *to* engage within interdependency means staying in relation to others. Paradoxically, in this sense, there is a greater sense of freedom in the emergence of leadership with the acceptance of our interdependencies because we more fully recog-nise ourselves and others through resonant relationships.

In this sense, reflection and reflexivity become closely connected to res-onance. Reflecting can be thought of as paying attention to the ongoing rhythms, in the way I described in the previous section. Reflexivity, then brings us back to ourselves and is the ability to think about how we have come to think (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 35–36). Indeed, Mead understands the entire process of being and becoming self as reflexive and argues:

> You have seen that the term 'self' is a reflexive affair. It involves an atti-tude of separation of the self from itself. Both the subject and the object are involved in the self in order that it may exist. The self must be iden-tified, in some sense, with the not-self. It must be able to come back at itself from the outside. The process, a process within which both of the phases of experienced life, a process in which these different phases can be identified with each other – not necessarily as the same phase but at least as expressions of the same process.
>
> (Mead, 1936: 88)

In this sense, he argues that we take our experiences and ourselves as objects for our own reflections and bring this back to ourselves and maybe get changed by it.

In my practice of leadership described in the narrative previously, I found how I both willingly and unwillingly took on the role of the detached leader in control of the process. Even though I was seeking to take on a more participative role as a consultant, in the case I have described, I found myself taking a different role in the second meeting compared to the first, and compared to what I first wanted. I felt caught up with different expectations since I knew we would be working together for the next year and I suddenly feared the judgements about the purpose of the process. Recalling Honneth's idea of free will, I would have been free to disrupt the emerging understanding of my responsibilities in the second meeting accepting the risks that came along, but I did not. Engaging as a rhythm analyst during the meeting might have enabled me to share my experience and to invite others into a shared inquiry of what we were doing together. The understanding of leadership as an interdependent practice also entails a showdown with the idea of the leader being in control but unable to encourage resonance or reflexivity. So, if we let go of the notion of the charismatic leader, what can leaders actually do, and how can freedom be exercised and experienced?

Some implications for leadership practice

Based on this experience in the Danish municipality, my ongoing work with this group has presented me with new opportunities to practise leadership based on my best judgements about how I can engage in the present in ways where I could be with myself in another. Instead of focusing on a specific goal or output, I have tried to focus on our experience and how to relate to this. Through my subsequent conversations with this group of managers, we tried to make sense of what went on at the meeting. I shared my own experience of being caught up in a wish for speed in order to prove that we were on the right track, and I became aware of their wish to spend more time in the small group dialogues and how the members of the planning group did not share my sense of urgency or pace in the process. By collaboratively inquiring into the different understandings and the ambiguities of everyday organisational life, leaders might find new ways of interacting. The emphasis on the temporal character of human interaction in everyday organisational life provides us with the ongoing opportunity

to make sense of our experiences and to find ways of moving on. So, in seemingly stuck and alienating rhythms, we might find degrees of freedom to improvise in new ways with one another through collaborative inquiry.

Resonance and reflexivity might still be what are needed in order to experience freedom as our engagement into being both enabled and constrained at the same time, but not as a way of relating I can either facilitate or control. However, leaders might or might not have a special impact on how people relate to others; what we can do is try to make sure we have a strong sense of self. In this sense, we can share our own struggles with freedom, participate in exploring our experiences and invite others into these conversations. Leadership practice can be negotiated through rhythm analysis and by paying attention to human interaction, which may require improvising into the present rhythms. By sharing some of the negotiation processes with more openness and doubt, it might help others to new understandings of themselves.

As such, leaders need to accept the uncertainty involved in these processes since we cannot predict the responses we will meet. This points to ongoing identity work in order to stay in close relation to both self and others while at the same time accepting that social acceleration, and competing social understandings of leadership, might make us lose sight of the paradoxical understanding of selves and others and get lost in either oneself or the other. In my experience from this narrative, I got lost in a set of imagined expectations of the group I was working with and the social understanding of the need for speed in organisational change processes and the anticipated expectations of me being the consultant in control of the process. I see now how I was not only constrained by the idealisations of speed and pace, but also simultaneously forming and reinforcing them. In this way my leadership practice, based on these idealisations also enabled and constrained the response from the managers and suggests how we carry a mutual responsibility for the emerging rhythms within which we negotiate identity.

Since these processes are ongoing, the good news is that there is always a next moment in which we can explore further, which helped me move on with the group of managers from the municipality and, in this sense, together, we regained a sense of freedom. In this sense, leadership and the sense of freedom are as much about the leader themselves as it is about others – as the two cannot be separated from each other. Staying in close

relation to both oneself and others can, as such, be seen as crucial for finding degrees of freedom within the practice of leadership.

Summing up

In opposition to understanding leaders and followers as a dichotomy, I have taken a dialectical perspective on the experience of freedom in leadership. I have argued for a paradoxical understanding of individual and social, and manager and organisation, where both are considered mutually constituting, and how this understanding can be helpful in inquiring into freedom in leadership.

Freedom in this sense is based on the assumptions of interdependent relationships and therefore not as liberation from the constraints we experience in these relations. Instead, freedom is understood on behalf of the fact that leadership practice is both enabled and constrained at the same time and as such can be perceived as the freedom *to* act instead of freedom *from*. I have argued that freedom to engage and time to explore these relations is necessary – we are not neutral or unaffected by the groups, the time or space in which we participate. Rushing over the processes of these entanglements might result from losing the paradox of individual and social and therefore losing the sense of self and others and through this, our sense of freedom.

To find ways in the complexity of enabling and constraining that is going on in organisations, I have argued that leaders may benefit from inquiring into everyday human interaction and into the emerging rhythms based on navigating time and space. By paying attention to whatever ambiguities we experience in the present, we can negotiate the possibilities of freedom to be "with oneself in another". In this way, we can continuingly explore the power relations in which we become selves and our freedom to practise leadership emerges. Leaders do not get liberated from this interdependency by a reflexive inquiry into the ongoing enabling and constraining. However, through such research we might find new ways of engaging and improvising into the present.

The social acceleration that characterises modernity is a significant constraint in this regard, and the need for speed is one example of idealisations within which leaders have to engage. However, the urgency with which we deliver outputs and results comes with the risk of not

paying attention to the interrelations and the risk of disconnecting means and ends. Simultaneously it comes with the danger of being alienated from both ourselves and others. I have argued how reflexivity and resonant relationships with others become central for leaders to manoeuvre to prevent alienation. Leadership is therefore about the way we relate to both ourselves and others, and I advocate for a radical openness to the otherness of others, which means finding ways of holding on to our own beliefs while at the same time staying dynamically open to the perceptions of others by listening to both ourselves and others. Based on resonance, we can reflexively engage with the interweaving of different intentions and rhythmed movements. Through this experience, we might find a degree of freedom to act into the emergent.

No leader can control what is played out. However, by emphasising that leadership is as much about self as it is about others, we might be able to experience another sense of freedom and find new ways of practising leadership from a position of free will. Reflexive leadership might not lead to a larger degree of freedom. However, freedom enables us to engage with the constraints we experience. Taking a paradoxical approach helps us to understand how we are both being formed by and forming the social. How to interact and further form the constraints we experience is then yet another responsibility of leaders.

Note

1   This chapter presents work that was first explored in the author's 2021 doctoral thesis entitled "The paradox of freedom in everyday leadership practice: An inquiry into the identity work of developing leadership in the public sector in Denmark" available at https://doi.org/10.18745/th.25481

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5

A DIALOGUE WITH ADAM HABIB

RADICAL PRAGMATISM – NAVIGATING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN UNIVERSITIES IN THE NEO-LIBERAL ERA

Adam Habib, with the editors

EC: Could you tell us about your background and your experience as an activist scholar?

The disciplinary scholarly tradition I speak from is political science. Not one that is defined by the empiricism of the USA or the historicism of British political science, but one akin to the French political tradition that emphasises the fundamental concept of power and sees power in multiple forms, as plural, seeing all relationships being defined in one way or the other by power. I come to this discussion about leadership not from an academic tradition of thinking through these issues but from an activist background. I see management and leadership of institutions as another form of my activism in an earlier life. And because activism, at least political activism, is so focused on power, my understanding of management and leadership inevitably became focused on power and how to navigate the different locales of power within institutions.

It might make sense to explain how I got into politics. I grew up in apartheid South Africa – a very specific set of circumstances and a rigidly

racialised society. In essence, everybody that I grew up with would have been in an environment which was largely Asian, or Indian in the South African context, and any cosmopolitanism was found across religion with people who were Hindu, Tamil or Christian. I grew up in an environment that was slightly political. My father was not a political activist, but a businessman; even so, he had in an earlier life got involved with a series of political actors and in the 1960s he joined the Unity Movement. They had tried to launch an armed struggle, like everybody else in South Africa in the 1960s, and they all got caught within a couple of months. My father channelled money for them through his business, so there was always suspicion about him, which meant he lost his passport: we all lost our passports. My mother died of cancer when I was ten years old, when she was 36. She couldn't travel to London for treatment because she had no passport and as a traditional Muslim wife she wouldn't go without her husband. All this was political in the margins of what it means to be political, but that had consequences in apartheid South Africa.

I grew up in a lovely extended family, but when you lose your mother as a child, you lose an anchor in your life. It sparked me off into being a rebel, railing against the world, really angry and primed to hunt for a cause. I often say to my wife Fatima, if I hadn't found the political cause and I hadn't met her, I would have probably got into drugs and overdosed! In 1980 I landed up in high school and walked into the largest student protest in the history of apartheid South Africa's Indian schools. This was in solidarity with the African schools' strike of 1976 – a response to the Soweto revolt. We were out of class for six months. It wasn't very radical, and was church-oriented à la Martin Luther King, but it took me into a new political world. It introduced me to Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, the African National Congress (ANC), Malcolm X, and the Palestinian struggle, none of which I really understood. I thought they all belonged to the same political tradition. I didn't understand the plural traditions, but it inspired a passion for reading, a passion for thinking through these issues, a kind of scholarly radicalism. So, for the next five years, I can't imagine that any speech I gave in class was not political.

I went to university, known as the political guy who was going to land up in jail. Just as I started university, I was recruited by the Unity Movement in South Africa, which my father had been on the margins of as a supporter.

It was Trotskyist, but it was also profoundly English in many ways, because they believed that Trotskyism was too good for the masses – that they just couldn't understand it. They articulated a liberal programme that was impossible to fulfil in the context of South Africa. Their agenda was socialist, but the outward-facing politics was a liberal anti-apartheid politics, mainly for intellectuals, as none of them were very working class. It was highly skilled but rigid, rule bound and conventional but at least they made me study – reading the history of South Africa and of liberation in general. Isaac Tabata was an important influence in these years.

KC: So, how did you find your way to this philosophical political science?

South Africa was becoming more and more politicised. The state responded harshly to the protests, it declared a state of emergency, the United Democratic Front emerged, and the ANC in turn declared South Africa ungovernable. Townships were in flames and everything was becoming more radicalised. I wanted to get involved but the party told me that would be adventurism and so I should continue to study. In 1985, I joined the ANC and National Forum at university with my fellow activists, debating with them about the Unity Movement and how they were not radical enough and how they needed to be much more anti-capitalist. In my second year I worked for an NGO (non-governmental organisation) called SACHED[1] that provided teaching resources to Black teachers and ran a literacy programme for workers in the unions. The Unity Movement expelled me for being involved in mass activity, which they saw as part of the ANC's populism. As part of SACHED, I started organising youth groups in the townships, but we were subject to attacks by the Inkatha Freedom Party, which was an armed vigilante group supported by the apartheid state. When we started housing young people at SACHED, who were refugees from the violence, the police raided us and I was arrested and taken to prison under the state of emergency regulations.

In prison I was interrogated, which became kind of weird because of the drawing of a rooster on one of our documents. It really was not sinister. I used to take the minutes and so doodled when I got bored. One day I had drawn a rooster on the minutes I was drafting and had forgotten about it. When the cops raided and confiscated my documents, they saw this

drawing and assumed that we were linked to Zanu PF in Zimbabwe because a rooster was their symbol. I wasn't in prison long, but it was two weeks' solitary confinement and it became difficult when they wouldn't give me decent food. One cop became paranoid that I would die because I wasn't eating and he started smuggling me Kentucky Burgers because he said, "look, I'm close to retirement and I really can't have you die because my retirement will then get sacrificed and they'll take my pension away". I got my first serious interrogation in prison, but I also saw how they treated detainees differently. White activists never got a slap, Indian activists got a slap, and African activists got a real beating up. I remember when we were being interrogated, this one African guy asked to go to the toilet and as he came out, the policeman was slapping him and saying, "how dare you piss in our shower! Don't you know where the toilet is?" and the guy was saying, "sorry boss, I didn't know that wasn't the toilet." And as he passed me in the corridor, he winked at me and said, "I got the bastards!" These little elements of resistance in the most difficult conditions taught me about politics in profound ways and fundamentally transformed me and who I became.

EC: How did they transform you?

Resistance takes place in many forms. You develop a camaraderie with people in prison that goes beyond ideological lines. You learn about consequences and what consequences are. You learn to be pragmatic, because it's fine experiencing emotional satisfaction as you stand up to the apartheid police until they start torturing you. The trick is not to get tortured because then you don't have to give up anything. So, you have to be pragmatic and make them think you're telling them things, but meantime, tell them things that they already know. Those are the little things you learn.

I studied political science by default because law required me to study Afrikaans, and I refused because I incorrectly saw it as the language of the oppressive class. Later, as a junior lecturer at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) I became a union activist, interested in transforming institutions and taking a social justice mandate seriously. I became Secretary General of the Academic Union, one of the most radical in the country, just as the university was embracing a transformation agenda – what is today known as "decolonisation". Despite campaigning against US involvement in

the Middle East, and a Marxist determination to overthrow capitalism, I was offered a scholarship to do a PhD in a US university as part of a programme to train the next generation in South Africa as it was becoming democratic. They put me down for City University of New York, a public university which was demographically and class diverse. Of course, I got involved in the politics and became a member of the Students' Representative Council of the South African students and experienced oppression. It was in the US that I learned that South Africa was not the only place that was in a struggle, that the world was full of oppression, exploitation and struggle. I began to transcend a crude, narrow nationalism and became much broader in my commitment to social justice.

My son Irfan was conceived in the USA in 1995 and I was intent on ensuring that "my son's first breath will be African air in the liberated South Africa!" – an example of the romantic illusions that infected so many of us in those early heady days of the transition to democracy. We returned to South Africa and I became engaged in transforming universities and writing and publishing about national politics. UDW was divided between far left and moderate progressives; I became embroiled in trying to mediate between the two but that fractiousness destroyed the university. By the end of 1999, most senior professors had left the university so it became completely juniorised (i.e. professors left so those remaining were junior) and lost its academic pedigree. It was merged with the University of Natal and I left to become the founding director of the Centre for Civil Society at the University of Natal, beginning to write about social struggles, mergers, and why one needs to transcend the racialised nature of South African higher education.

Two things came out of that UDW experience. One is that racism needs to be transcended: if there are racialised institutions, they can't remain so – they need to be reimagined. But the second is about the mistakes of the far left in UDW. This experience lived with me and informed how I engaged as Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) during #FeesMustFall[2] – I was fundamentally influenced by the politics of failure in UDW in the 1990s.

In the meantime, at the Centre for Civil Society, we won grants and established a research centre dedicated to reimagining social movements and thinking through social change. I went on to become Director of

the Democracy and Governance Division of the Human Science Research Council, equivalent of the Brookings Institution in the USA or Chatham House in the UK.[3] I researched and wrote about reimagining higher education, public institutions and democratisation and inclusive development from a multidisciplinary approach. At this point, I was beginning to craft an academic and political identity as a scholarly activist, while ensconced in a public intellectual tradition.

In 2013 I became Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg (UJ), which was a merger between a Black institution and one of the most conservative White Afrikaner universities. For the next six years, I was involved in transforming it from a White African institution to a kind of diverse, liberal university for the post-apartheid South Africa.

> *KC*: When you found yourself in the formal leadership position, with this background of rebellion for want of a better word, did you find what you wanted to do and the expectations that people had of you to be similar or different? And how did you manage that?

I was still not the vice-chancellor so I had a relative autonomy from the formal power – what I would call the position of authority. I was deputy and nobody expected me to carry the can, but it gave me enough closeness to power to understand how to do it and to start understanding the pressures facing the vice-chancellor about financial sustainability and about creating a new space. He wasn't an academic but came from government and broadcasting, which is why he delegated to me the responsibility to build a research tradition. I explored new research global partnerships, using my experience with donors, and worked on building a new public political image. When we got involved in the debate on an academic boycott of Israeli institutions, I suggested we establish a Commission which I would chair.

So, in my deputy role, I had enough autonomy from the vice-chancellor's role that people would cut me some slack, but enough closeness to make some decisions. In five years, we doubled UJ's research output – partly by attracting new professors – established new research centres, increased its postgraduate student footprint, and re-established its diversity and post-apartheid profile. UJ was enormously successful in creating one of the first successful mergers.

One of the biggest institutions that lost out as UJ succeeded was Wits University because it was next door. When Wits advertised its vice-chancellorship, I applied and I got the job. Wits was divided between a mainstream and the left, and the left backed me, ironically, because they saw this left-leaning executive, with a success story at UJ; they saw me as someone who would advance a progressive agenda.

When I walked into Wits, the first thing that happened was a sexual harassment scandal and the second was an incident where a Jewish musician was forced out of the campus by student supporters of the Palestinian Movement. I told them, "although I am a supporter of the Palestinian struggle, I won't allow that"; so I acted against the students and I put them through a disciplinary hearing. My experience at Wits was influenced by UDW – I was determined not to repeat the same mistakes. Learning from my experience in transforming institutions, I prioritised increasing the number of Wits' postgraduates and its research outputs, diversifying it, creating a financially sustainable place, and deracialising it.

I was also elected Chair of Universities South Africa, a membership organisation representing South Africa's public universities. Two years into my tenure – there I was: a left-leaning activist executive supported by the students and backed by the Student Union – and the #FeesMustFall Student Movement started protesting about fees. The students said, "we expect to shut down the university; as a progressive you must shut it down". I tried to negotiate with them, saying, "let's try and navigate this" but they wouldn't. The first day when the protests happened, I flew to Johannesburg to meet them and explain that we would have to call in the police. The students said,

"We don't want you bringing the police. You've lost your progressive credentials and we want you to close the place down."

"I can't", I replied.

"We're protesting."

"I'll allow the protest as long as you don't burn the place."

"We want to go inside the concourse" (in one of the main administration buildings). And it's hot.

"Yes, let them", I told the staff.

"Will you come with us?" they asked, so I agreed to this too.

I sat with them 24 hours overnight and this then was captured by national television and they created the impression that they'd kidnapped

me. I learned to navigate the #FeesMustFall Movement both as vice-chancellor and as the chair of Universities South Africa. I became the face of the vice-chancellors engaging this social movement and I had to learn how to manage the politics.

> *KC*: How do you know what to do in those situations that you've just been describing?

I had to learn the lessons. Initially, I went in with the students and spent 24 hours; then it became very tense when it went national. We cut a deal eventually, but I refused to give in. I said to them, "I understand where you stand, but I can't declare free education. Free education is a thing that the government declares. So, I won't allow you to shut down the campus. But I will sympathise with you if you march to the union buildings. I'll march with you and sit with you but I won't allow you to shut the university down."

"OK, get rid of the increases", they said.

"I can't. The increases are because the government subsidy is falling and I can't undermine efficient research universities because Africa needs its research universities."

We agreed that we would come back to talk the following Monday as a pragmatic solution. My Board agreed to support me and seven of them sat with me among the students in a demonstration of solidarity. But on the Monday, when we were supposed to meet again, the students refused. They broke the doors to a building and so then I said, "I will not concede and meet with you if you destroy our infrastructure".

So, I'm learning all the time. I'm learning from my own experiences and from my UDW experience as an activist. One of the student leaders said to me, "we hate you as a vice-chancellor at this moment", and I asked, "why?" And he replied, "I wish we had a non-political vice-chancellor because you know what we're going to do before we do it". Because I had been a student activist!

I became the face navigating this protest and I started writing about it in public. #FeesMustFall became a story about fighting for the hearts and souls of South Africans. I appeared on Twitter and was on TV, debating with the students and taking them on, my position being, "Yes, you have a right to protest. No, you don't have a right to burn." Partly at issue here was a

politics of violence and what's legitimate in a democracy and what's not. I started arguing against what I saw as an anarchist tendency emerging in politics, or more specifically in identity politics, that loses its understanding of the cosmopolitan tradition.

At one point, I polled the students. People asked me, "why did you poll?" My answer was that the Student Union and the anarchic left said that they spoke for the students, so I called independent auditors to poll 30,000 students on whether they wanted me to shut down the university and 80 per cent said, "no – we'd like you to continue". It demonstrated that the majority stood with the executive rather than the Student Union. At the end of it I went to Harvard and wrote *Rebels and Rage* (2019), the story of a vice-chancellor trying to grapple with the #FeesMustFall protests.

KC: What does all of this mean for how you think about leadership?

To reflect on what all this means for leadership, I will draw attention to two fundamental principles. The first is radical pragmatism: based on the premise that if you want to lead a public institution, you have to keep the radical part. You have to keep your social justice goal in sight. I never forget that. When reforming, you have to have your eye on social justice goals but in ways that are pragmatic enough for the real world. You have to operate in a world that requires financial sustainability, alliances, efficiency, excellence, stature and credibility. And so, through radical pragmatism you can operate in a world that exists, not a world you wish existed. That's the first principle.

The second principle is this: context is important. How you deal with challenges in London is very different from how you will deal with it in Canada or South Africa. The inequalities and violence in South Africa require a response that is very different from the one needed if you are living within the liberal sensibilities of London. Context is defined both by geography – whether you are in London, New York, South Africa, Buenos Aires, Mumbai – but also the historical moment. How you define and how you operate in 1930s' London is different to how you operate in 1960s' London or London in 2022. How you operate in the period of Margaret Thatcher, the period of Tony Blair or the period of Boris Johnson is different.

So, I apply radical pragmatism as principle number one, and context as principle two in understanding leadership. That gets me into trouble, but it also defines me. I apply those principles in different contexts. When

I applied them in the context of South Africa in 2016, you couldn't tell me I shouldn't bring in police and have security when people had burnt a billion and a half worth of infrastructure.[4] You might have sat comfortably in London and said that, but you couldn't tell me I should've let those buildings be burnt down in Wits because then there would have been no one to learn in the next generation.

We also live in a very polarised political moment with the far right and what I call the anarchist left. The anarchist left are very dangerous because they see the world in zero-sum terms. And then identitarian politics has emerged among both the right and parts of the left. This moment is akin to 1920s' Germany and to 1960s' China. What's required in leadership, is not only to stare down the right, but also to stare down the anarchist left, because if they're pandered to, institutions will be destroyed, either in a place like South Africa by allowing burning to happen, or in a place like London by allowing the far right to capitalise on the intolerance of the anarchic left.

So, in the UK, Johnson has been able to intervene in higher education in a manner that hasn't happened since the Thatcher years. That's because universities have been unable to stare down intolerant traditions within the left that have enabled people like Johnson to manipulate the issues around freedom of expression. This creates the space for the right wing to mobilise in ways that they wouldn't have been able to. The far anarchist left have not managed to paralyse the right, including in the politics of race, because the right have their own racialised networks and they don't care. The liberal progressive intelligentsia are paralysed, terrified to open their mouths or when they do, they do so in such diplomatic and ambiguous terms that they can be read in multiple ways. And in the process, this is creating an angst in higher education in the UK that allows Johnson to manipulate it. It is happening around Churchill in Oxford and Cambridge, around the Hume Building in Edinburgh, around trans in Essex, and around race in SOAS.

I'm not sure that vice-chancellors in the UK have understood this historical moment and adjusted their leadership accordingly. What they are doing, therefore, is emboldening both the anarchic left and the far right and further constricting the room to manoeuvre of universities, which are meant to be liberal progressive institutions. Of course, I, too, have made

mistakes. I have, for example, misread a specific moment, but I am trying to learn by thinking through a collective learning experience of over 20 years and applying it to work out what it means for leadership and management in this historical moment.

> *EC*: Imagine you have a vice-chancellor asking for your advice about this historical moment. What would you advise them to do in a very practical everyday sense about how to understand your context and respond as a leader?

University vice-chancellors are trying to manage through a managerial orthodoxy and a political orthodoxy. The managerial orthodoxy is to get "bums on seats" to be financially sustainable; drive research output to have academic stature; cross-subsidise from the sciences to the humanities; drive up postgraduate research output; but never forget to grow the numbers – especially internationally. But they're missing the point that by attracting people to London and New York from the developing world, both students on scholarships and academic staff, they end up weakening institutions in other parts of the world and accelerating the brain drain. At this historical moment, when all of our challenges are transnational in character – climate change, pandemics – you need human capabilities and institutions all over the world. Yet their model of partnership focuses on the managerial orthodoxy of the balance sheet, doing things to ensure short-term financial sustainability, but undermining long-term global sustainability. That's part one.

Political orthodoxy is part two. We are now in the middle of post-Black Lives Matter – seeing plenty of problems emerging, including an alienation of Black people particularly, and minorities more generally. Too many university boards are largely White and when people start raising issues of race, they get nervous. So, they run for the hills; often they capitulate. In some cases, if you appease, hoping the problem goes away, you end up emboldening action, because there's such an anarchist tradition as part of this protesting cohort, you're inevitably emboldening a way of seeing in zero-sum terms, which is intolerant of other political traditions, even within a progressive movement.

You have to decide what you want to do. Take the example of monuments. Do you want to bring down all statues with colonial connotations? Really?! In the UK, which was the centre of a colonial empire for 300 years? It will

mean taking out 99 per cent of statues! Do you think the political right is going to allow that? Do you think, frankly, the citizens will allow it? So, then you create a caricature of politics in which you can't win; you end up in a zero-sum game where you try to out-left the left, and in the process, you're constantly emboldening the claims which enable intolerance that allows the right to start intervening. We've handed over freedom of expression to the political right; they argue for it and the left are saying "the situation is not so bad", as if that's a legitimate excuse or explanation.

The answer is to win back the management orthodoxy in a way that is politically astute, which can't just be pragmatic; it must be *radically* pragmatic. You cannot operate in a manner that deepens the inequalities between the global academy and undermines institutions in the Global South. So, let's by all means grow student numbers, but let's do it, for example, by looking at partnering with institutions of the South in co-credentialled, co-taught and co-curriculated courses. So, then you've trained more doctors and they remain in the Global South, so when the next pandemic happens, they're there; you train entrepreneurs so they remain in their countries so they can do start-ups; so that others in the Global South can look at a contextually relevant climate change policy. At SOAS we plan to create a network of institutions that are transnational in a moment that makes it possible because of digitised technologies. This business model is taking finances seriously, but also pushing the boundaries of social justice in higher education.

In the political sense, we need to win back the leadership of what freedom of expression means and how it links to public accountability. Take anti-Semitism as an example. The UK government demanded that we adopt the definition from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) but we refused. We took the definition and generalised it. So, we developed a charter against racism, anti-Semitism, and all forms of cultural chauvinism that defined our three distinct commitments: that we'll stand against discrimination; that it will be done in a manner that recognises political plurality in the university; and that we will apply the rules equally to all, against both the right and the left. In this way, we are saying intolerance, whether by the left or right, is unacceptable and that we're interested in freedom of expression, but will also build diverse and socially just institutions. When we take the debate out in the public, they say, "why don't you adopt the IHRA definition?" Our answer is, "why don't

you adopt ours? Look at this charter – it says we stand against all forms of discrimination. It says we apply the rules equally to all and it says the university is a plurality of expressions." So, you take the fight to them and you win the political logic.

Let me use one final example. I am struck by the anti-racism debate. There's no doubt that there's structural racism; the past lives with us in the present and it's evident in all the indicators around attainment, access, jobs and salaries. How we manage this struggle is important. I think two mistakes have been made. First, there isn't sufficient understanding of the political praxis of Nelson Mandela. His greatest strategic insight was that if you want sustainable change, you have to win the middle ground. If you're only mobilising on the extremes, you only get emotional satisfaction, but if you want societal change then you need to win enough support, you need to win the middle ground. But ironically, the way that anti-racism activism – at least the anarchist traditions within it – play this is by alienating the liberal intelligentsia and the middle ground. Boris Johnson is capitalising on the angst of the middle ground and that is why he's winning what were previously Labour strongholds, not because people have become right wing, but because they have real concerns and progressives haven't put forward a political project with which they can identify.

Second, many have defined institutional racism as if it is simply structural racism in an institutional form. But if institutional racism is about intent, and not simply about experience, then you have to ask a question. Does institutional racism actually need intent or is it only experiential? If not, and institutional racism is simply structural racism in an institutional form, then you can never deracialise an institution until society is fully deracialised. You're creating a politics of old when some were saying don't bother about reforms, simply focus on the socialist revolution, because when you have the socialist revolution, everything else will be sorted out. But if you reimagined institutional racism as also incorporating intent, then you could use the label of institutional racism as a lever of change. You could say, you must declare a commitment to anti-racism, that must manifest in how many Black students you take, in how many diverse students you take, and in your explicit commitment to bridging the attainment gap. Then if you meet certain benchmarks, you're not institutionally racist. If you don't commit to this, then you are. You're using the label as a lever to bring about anti-racism as a political practice.

The debate on institutional racism in the UK is so governed by the disciplinary tradition of psychology, and doesn't sufficiently appreciate the tradition of scholarly activist politics with its focus on power. So, it gets stuck on labelling as a lever for change. The British are so focused on the US that they have forgotten that there are other political traditions and lessons to learn from South Africa, post-colonial India, post-colonial China, and the decolonisation experiments of much of Africa, Asia and Latin America. And why can't we have this debate? Because progressives and the liberal intelligentsia are so scared of the anarchist identitarians amongst the left that have retreated into safe spaces and by having quiet cappuccinos, rather than confronting this political discourse and taking it on. I would say to vice-chancellors: have courage!

Vice-chancellors are not meant to be CEOs of banks or IT companies. They are CEOs of universities, which means they're meant to be scholars. They're meant to be public intellectuals who show scholarly integrity, who encourage and lead this debate. You can't achieve social change without debating and deliberating about it and our university environments are not allowing for it. Because even if you mention the debate, the answer from a group of anarchist scholars is, "this is counter revolutionary right-wing propaganda!" You can't have a rational debate. And if you can't have a rational debate, how can you think through social change and anti-racism?

> *EC*: What is your experience as a leader and manager – galvanising, inspiring, maybe sometimes coercing, and persuading other people to do things and stopping the people who are unhelpful?

There are four principles or strategic pathways: One is delegation: what you delegate to whom? How do you steward it and manage it? And what don't you delegate? The second is alliances. How do you build alliances? With whom? And how do you isolate those contrarians to the agenda you have? The third is using a mix of acculturation and punitive measures. And finally, sequencing interventions.

So, the first. I've learned you can never delegate the strategy, the vision, or the social justice goals to somebody else. I know many vice-chancellors do and I'm puzzled by those who set up a committee, which they don't lead, that does the strategic plan for them; or hand it to a deputy vice-chancellor of strategy. So, strategy, and enabling the realisation of that

strategy, has to be in your hands as vice-chancellor. But you cannot do the implementation of it yourself – you just don't have enough time and you need a relative autonomy from the individual actions. I've learned that harshly. Initially I was very committed when I started at Wits not to be an ivory-tower vice-chancellor: getting involved in all the fracas, having lots of meetings, engaging the students. Then I realised that was dangerous because it compromises your office. You need the legitimacy of your office to engage in the big issues. So, you don't want to get embroiled in small fights and make enemies, but set the policy that determines what happens. But I've also learned that when you delegate you don't give it up, you steward it. You need to have key performance indicators; you define what you want and you hold your executives to account for it. You meet them regularly, and you steward them in their implementation, so they know they've got relative autonomy as opposed to full autonomy.

The second is that no strategic project can be advanced without building allies. I spend most of my time building allies: managers, professors, board members; but I also make enemies. Some, I inherited at SOAS and some I have made through losing political capital. One of the things that irritates me about my vocalisation of the "N-word" in March, during a discussion with students who were reporting the use of the word by a lecturer, was that it enabled some people to pigeonhole me which meant I lost polit-ical capital. I'm irritated at myself for having hurt some people's feelings because those are potential allies that I may have sacrificed and I now have to work hard at getting back. But the trick about advancing your agenda is not to worry that there will be opposition to it – there always is – but to make sure that you've got the alliances and broader support.

The third is that I believe that you can't do this simply through accul-turation. Acculturation is important: enabling people to pursue a strategy because this is what they believe in is absolutely fundamental. But there's always a few who will not be acculturated. And they will undermine your agenda unless you tell them that you will take action if they push too far. Now I am not suggesting that I don't accept that people's views can differ. I accept that people will have alternative opinions. But if they threaten to burn the buildings down à la Wits, they're going to have to know they will be expelled. If you attack another staff member, and threaten them and force them out, you *will* be held accountable. There are certain acts

beyond the parameters that you will be held accountable for and there will be consequences. I've often found you do the punitive actions two or three times and everybody knows, and then they are not needed any more.

Finally, sequencing is important. How you sequence your reforms and your interventions is important because I found that as you succeed, more allies come on your side. So, success builds on success. If you can fix the resource problem, start running a slight surplus, use and spend money on people's IT, sort out their real problems on a day-to-day basis, and make sure queries are answered quickly, then you win enough to create a sense of success – and people begin to develop a vested interest and then cut you some slack.

My final point about leadership is to draw attention to the importance of courage. Some people are prepared to join the ship rather late. But the problem is they might have been unconstructive, or even destructive, earlier in their career. I'd advise: have the courage to forgive. It's not about personal forgiveness, it is broader than that, because if you allow them to come on board, and look the other way, you create an incentive culture within the institution that doesn't make it a zero-sum environment. If you say to people, you can never come back for something that you did long ago, they will always be against you because there's no route back. But, even if you don't fully believe them, if you allow them a route back, and don't continuously remind them even if you're wary of them, then alliances become possible again.

So that's my story.

Notes

1 The South African Committee for Higher Education.
2 #FeesMustFall was a student-led protest movement in 2015 that aimed to stop increases in fees and increase government funding of universities in South Africa.
3 The Brookings Institution is a non-profit organisation based in Washington D.C. that researches problems facing societies in the US and globally. Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs) is an independent policy institute based in London that aims to help societies across the world adapt to change.
4 ZAR R1.5 billion is equivalent to about GBP £75 million.

PART II

DEVELOPING LEADERS

The chapters in Part I illustrate how leaders are products of more than just their individual qualities or the environments in which they participate. In Part II, we move on to explore another facet of leadership: expectations created through the promotion of skills, behaviours, models, tools and techniques within management or executive education and leadership development. This global industry no doubt plays an enormous part in the construction of leadership identities. And when they identify the likelihood of organisational success mechanistically, with the competence of individual leaders who are all trying to be their best selves as the central component, the conditions are perhaps ripe for, on the one hand, arrogance and hubris, and feeling like an imposter on the other.

However, if leaders are constituted through social and political relations, then relationality and individuality need to be seen as inseparable. This includes those developing or assessing leaders who themselves participate in both the construction of leadership identities, and perpetuate demand for executive education and leadership development. Our contributors in this part describe how they have found themselves making sense of this involvement and what they have found more helpful – or tolerable – in their own practice. For Moshayof, a White British/Israeli woman, it's making space for reflection in favour of abstract models in global corporations; for

Talucci, a White North American man, it's paying attention to relational experience when training NASA cadets; for Flinn, a White British man, it's using methods inspired by group analytic psychotherapy to enable leaders to understand their citizenship in executive education in a UK business school; and for Avigdor, a White Israeli woman, it's making the most of her own judgement in ostensibly 'objective' talent management processes in Israel. All but one of the chapters are based on experiences that have taken place in the Global North, while Haileselassie, a Black Ethiopian woman, adds a more political perspective that illustrates the similarities and differences of developing leaders in the Global South.

As in Part I, our contributors share an interest in taking experience seriously, and identifying aspects of how people work together that have been less commonly heard in organisational life. All of them try to move beyond the kind of idealisations and managerialist promises that can often be found in leadership development. They do this by paying attention to what happens when they work with their clients and students, describing the developments in their own practice in relation to the influences of different disciplines and habitus. Their insights might be useful to other leadership development practitioners and executive educators who are intrigued by the multiple gaps between rhetorical promises and the everyday messy practice of leading. They move far beyond deconstruction to reflecting on what happens when you lead by taking plural experience seriously and improvising to take the next steps.

6

A CRITICAL LOOK AT CORPORATE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Sharon Moshayof

Introduction[1]

As a consultant working with global companies in the area of leadership development (LD), I have wrestled with the question of whether my work really makes a difference. In this chapter, I share my dilemmas relating to the basic assumption underpinning the whole field of LD: that leaders' behaviours can be developed in a predetermined direction by way of training programmes, and that subsequently those leaders' 'improved' behaviours and actions can bring about specific outcomes for their teams and organisations.

My experience is global: I grew up in the UK, have spent most of my adult life in Israel, and have also lived and worked for shorter periods in the US and in Belgium. Before becoming an independent consultant in 2014, I held senior roles in Human Resources (HR) and LD with one of the largest global pharmaceutical companies from 1998–2014, working in just about every region of the world.

At the time of writing this chapter, the world is still dealing with the unprecedented health and economic ramifications of COVID-19, the pandemic which has changed so many aspects of our lives. As a global LD professional, I was accustomed to travelling across the world to facilitate programmes for my clients. In March 2020, this all came to a screeching halt. I was, however, able to pivot from mostly in-person to fully virtual modes of working, albeit in a reduced capacity.

Since becoming a consultant, and in order to keep up to date with current organisational thinking, I have continued to attend educational sessions on different leadership topics, including with several major corporate LD organisations operating globally from prestigious US business school campuses. From the early days of the crisis, I have received invitations to webinars in which presenters explored the new business and organisational context that was unfolding due to the pandemic, offering advice on how to handle the new situation. The titles of these webinars suggested that a solution would be offered, a set of simple techniques to handle the difficult times we were all facing. Interestingly, these often included a number, for example: '*Seven* Strategies for Leading a Crisis-Driven Reorg;' '*Four* Practices to Manage Today's Uncertainty;' '*Nine* Skills and Mindsets to Navigate the Pandemic;' '*Five* Strategies Every Leader Must Embrace to Harness Disruption' or simply: 'How to Drive, Survive, and Thrive in a Crisis.' These titles reflect the pseudoscientific approach that lends symbolic credibility and feeds into a managerialist focus on evidence-based management.

The webinars were typically short, presentation-based sessions (not more than an hour and often just 30 minutes long) with hundreds of virtual participants from all over the world, all muted and invisible to the presenters and to each other. The invitation to one such webinar in April 2020, stated, 'as businesses grapple with the COVID-19 crisis, CEOs have a historic opportunity to demonstrate wise leadership and positively reshape the mindsets of their employees to serve the larger good.' Another claimed that 'effective leadership can make crises manageable instead of overwhelming,' promising to explain 'how you can project leadership and humanity by embracing your duty to others and by leveraging your individual expertise to help address new challenges' (Hernandez, 2020).

Despite a certain degree of scepticism, I accepted invitations to these webinars, perhaps out of a sense of 'FOMO,' a fear of missing out, worried

that this would be **the** session that would finally provide me with the elusive tools for getting a grip on the situation. The webinars suggested that such an answer was within reach. So, feeling curious (and with plenty of spare time), I listened intently as professors and business leaders from across the globe offered advice on management in this time of great uncertainty. What struck me about the content of the sessions that I attended throughout 2020 was the high degree of simplification and the abstract nature of the content, as well as the managerialist approach presented.

Managerialism refers to the idea that managers have a unique and privileged role of directing the work of others, in which predictability and control are assumed, and measurement is central (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010; Flinn and Mowles, 2014; Mowles, 2011). Throughout my career in large corporations, this is how we considered organisational life, never questioning its basic assumptions, nor the ensuing HR processes (for example, performance management, or talent management processes, see Avigdor's chapter in this volume).

Of course, no answers were presented during the webinars, nor do they even exist. The advice presented felt detached from the everyday challenges faced by leaders. I wonder if a reason for joining could have been a desire to undergo some kind of group soothing of our anxieties regarding the pandemic and its multiple ramifications, rather than a serious expectation to receive actionable solutions. Kevin Flinn, a co-author in this volume, addresses this in relation to LD programmes:

> the false certainty provided by idealised models and theories help to relieve the anxieties of leaders who are struggling to cope with the complexities and uncertainties of their everyday life in organizations.
>
> (Flinn, 2011: 128)

The use of idealised models is of course not specific to the pandemic, although they are particularly alluring during this time of high stress and uncertainty. In previous research, I inquired into my experience designing and delivering LD programmes at the global corporations where I have spent most of my career. I suggest that the pandemic has accentuated several patterns that might help us understand the issues related to a conventional, managerialist approach to LD. Our experiences in 2020/2021, therefore, serves as a useful backdrop for this chapter.

After having adopted a pragmatist perspective and applying my ideas to a broader context than COVID-19 (my doctoral research pre-dates the pandemic by nearly three years), I suggest that LD should focus on taking experience seriously, meaning exploring lived experiences and practices, both critically and reflexively. I advocate this idea of 'taking experience seriously' in contrast to other possibilities that I frequently encounter in the course of my practice, in which we abstract away from daily interactions, hiding or attempting to ignore the messier elements of organisational life such as power struggles. I critiqued LD programmes, including my own, which focus on simplified models and abstractions like those featured in the COVID-19-related webinars with the promises of 'Five ways to do this or that' etc.

Ralph Stacey claims that these models are 'abstract, idealised and edifying' (2012: 64), but there is clearly something appealing about how they provide what is an illusion of control. Lists of recommended actions offer an 'if/then' linear structure to navigate our way through adversity towards a positive outcome. This is truer than ever in the midst of the current crisis where we would all be happy to learn how to 'drive, survive, and thrive.' I argue, however, that such simple models, concepts, and over-optimistic claims cannot deliver what they promise, and may do more harm than good in presenting a non-congruent view of leadership that barely resonates with those attending LD sessions.

In this chapter, I draw on my experience to explain how and why my practice as a consultant in LD has shifted, in the hope that it will be valuable for practitioners in this field.

Conceptualising Leadership and Leaders

Working in LD in global corporations, trait theories of leadership are dominant (e.g. Heifetz, 2009; Bass, 1990). These suggest that leaders share a common pattern of personal characteristics, for example, charisma, influence, or executive presence. In the past, I did not question the idea that a leader is considered to be a heroic, omnipotent and autonomous individual who possesses specific personal characteristics, nor did I challenge the conceptualisation of leadership as the 'successful influence by the leader that results in the attainment of goals by the influenced followers' (Bass, 1990: 14). In the corporate world in which I grew up as an HR professional, it

follows that LD is concerned with developing leaders' personal skills and abilities so that they become more influential in this goal-oriented process.

The COVID-19 webinars I attended reflected this way of thinking about leadership, as seen in the webinar invitation for leaders to learn how to 'demonstrate wise leadership and positively reshape the mindsets of their employees to serve the larger good.' So, logically, if leaders adopt particular prescribed behaviours, they can be sure of a positive outcome.

I believe that this view is misleading. First, as I will explain in this chapter, because I do not think that anyone can reshape anyone else's mindset, nor do I believe that we can know in advance what will 'serve the larger good.' Stacey critiques this largely unchallenged view of mainstream thinking about leaders and leadership:

> based on the assumption that an organization can be thought of as a system for which leaders and managers can more or less choose the strategic direction and/or design, influence, or condition the process which will determine that direction.
>
> (Stacey, 2011a: 328)

Second, I find this invitation to 'demonstrate wise leadership' unrealistic. Despite the expectation for a leader to develop a vision, and inspire others to follow it, the work of the leader is, in fact, far less about vision and much more about the everyday navigation of conflicting desires, opinions, and priorities. This dissonance is explored by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), who suggest that we should not consider leaders to be special people who deal in visions and other such grandiose activities. Similarly, organisational scholar Ann Cunliffe (2011) argues that leaders do not spend the vast majority of their time performing heroic actions, but rather, dealing with the mundane and micro-details of daily life, in conversation with others. Mowles (2011: 41) suggests that the idea of a heroic, visionary leader reflects 'magico-mythical thinking,' which is more fantasy based than rooted in leaders' actual experiences.

I propose a more critical way of thinking about leadership, far removed from the dominant managerialist paradigm in which I spent most of my career. Critical approaches such as the work of the Critical Management Studies tradition (for example, Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Jackall, 2010; Spicer, 2013) challenge the largely

unquestioned assumptions of a predominantly managerialist approach to organisations, including the assumption that leaders can direct others to predetermined outcomes or that key elements of organisational life are measurement, control, and predictability.

Prior to becoming a 'scholar-practitioner' (Thomas, 2012), someone who applies the tools of critical inquiry to their practice, I rarely adopted a critical approach which includes questioning assumptions and formerly taken-for-granted beliefs. As I became increasingly critical in my approach, I turned to pragmatism, drawing on the late 19th and early 20th century American scholars George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, who developed a philosophical approach that takes human experience and practice as its starting point, encourages looking at wider patterns, and aims to inform that practice in a useful way.

Pragmatism has enjoyed something of a renaissance since the 1970s and has been adopted extensively by contemporary scholars of the critical and pragmatist tradition, such as Martela (2015); Thomas (2012); and Watson (2010). Focusing on 'taking experience seriously' I was influenced by their thinking which led me to formulate the ideas in this chapter. As Watson claims, 'The pragmatist evaluates knowledge about the world in terms of its power to inform action' (Watson, 2010: 916), therefore the key question for a pragmatist is not 'is it true?' but more importantly, 'is it useful?'

Pragmatists challenge the idea of one truth, of an objective world 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Dewey famously coined and rejected the concept of a 'spectator theory of knowledge' (Dewey, 1929), a term which refers to knowledge being objective and unrelated to the person considering it (the 'spectator'). Instead, he argues that what is 'known' is always related to the person considering that knowledge, the 'knower,' leading to an understanding of knowledge as provisional and context dependent. This contrasts with one of the tenets of the dominant discourse of management, for example, in MBA studies: the presentation of knowledge as universal and certain.

This view of knowledge is implicit in the 'roadmap' approach to management adopted in the COVID-19 webinars: the five ways to do this or nine steps to achieving that – tools and techniques which can be taught and applied universally. Pragmatists, in contrast, view all knowledge as fallible,

believing we can only claim that something is a 'warranted assertion' (Dewey, 1938, referenced in Martela, 2015: 537), a useful theory to inform our actions until something more helpful comes along.

In addition to adopting a pragmatist perspective about leadership, my evolving practice was also deeply influenced by the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Mowles, 2011; Stacey, 2011a, 2012; Griffin and Stacey, 2005), introduced earlier in this volume. This radical alternative to the dominant discourse in organisational studies argues that organisations are not rational and linear systems, but rather processes of human relating, in which emergence and interdependence lead to the essential unpredictability of human interaction. These processes are then understood as 'acts of communication, power relations, and the interplay between people's choices arising in acts of evaluation' (Griffin and Stacey, 2005: 3). If we accept this alternative approach, it necessitates a departure from Bass' mainstream view of leadership earlier, and also has implications for how we might think about the development of leaders.

To illustrate the change in my practice, I will now share a narrative from a programme that I facilitated several years ago and present the detailed context in which it occurred. I find that writing and reflecting on narratives allows me to engage reflexively with an experience that I found puzzling. This narrative is of an LD workshop that took place in 2015. It became a watershed moment for me, after which things would not be the same for my practice.

The names of all organisations and people in this chapter have been anonymised.

Narrative #1: Developing Leaders at NEWTECH

I had been hired to facilitate a leadership programme at NEWTECH, a global hi-tech company headquartered in Ireland. The programme approach had been designed by Bob, the CEO; Sarah, the HR Director; and Samantha, a leadership consultant. Its goal was to cascade a new leadership model, based on ideas from 'The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world,' (Heifetz et al., 2009). Heifetz' book (and indeed its very title) reflects the systemic approach to management introduced above, particularly the idea that leaders can stand outside of a system and design its future. The concept of a 'cascade' refers to the organisational process

whereby a strategy or programme is communicated by leaders at one level of management to those at the next level.

I was asked to work with Brendan, a member of Bob's leadership team, who led one of the largest technical support groups at NEWTECH. Brendan had sent out an email invitation to the workshop in advance, telling his team members: 'It is essential for each of you to inspirationally lead your people with clarity of vision' (NEWTECH internal document). Note how the language sets out his expectation for the kind of 'heroic' leadership described earlier.

This workshop took place about a year into my consulting practice, and I was still learning about my new role as an independent consultant and external facilitator. I remember it clearly as an awkward day. I went through the detailed agenda designed by Samantha to present the new model, but felt a distinct lack of interest and engagement from the 12 participants, the senior members of Brendan's group. They hardly spoke up despite my efforts to draw them in, until at one point the term 'empowerment' was presented as the core of the new model. Upon hearing this, several of the leaders looked up from their phones, where they were surreptitiously checking their emails.

They began challenging Brendan, arguing that NEWTECH's CEO, Bob, was highly controlling, a 'micro-manager' in their words, the opposite of an 'empowering' leader, so how could this concept be placed at the heart of the company's new leadership approach? Didn't Brendan see the irony? Brendan curtailed this line of questioning with an instruction to the team to accept 'empowerment' as a key element of the required leadership style with no further questions, and to move on.

'Bullshit Bingo' – Thinking Critically about the NEWTECH Workshop

Reflecting on the experience at NEWTECH, and thinking about the COVID-19 webinars, I find them problematic for similar reasons. Drawing on critical management writer, Robin Holt, I believe that the participants experienced this kind of session as 'fiction that bears little resemblance to lived experience' (2006: 1667).

At NEWTECH, the new model and its leadership ideas around 'empowerment' were presented by Brendan as abstract and idealised concepts, wholly incongruent with the leaders' experiences at the company. Yet, any

attempts to raise concerns about the ideas were swiftly shut down by him. Reflecting back on the session, I recall a sense of personal crisis. I had always accepted the fundamental assumption of mainstream LD: that its goal was to develop specific leadership competencies, which would in turn lead to positive business outcomes. At NEWTECH, for example, the model was designed to develop leadership competencies such as: 'Be bold and take smart risks,' 'Enable empowerment,' or 'Be a disciplined executor' which were supposed to lead to the desired business outcome of doubling sales.

Revisiting NEWTECH a year after the workshop, no noticeable change in leadership practices could be observed, and sales had not doubled, so clearly the programme had not achieved its declared goals. So what, if anything, had the programme accomplished, or was it a complete waste of time – the leaders' as well as mine? This question was at the heart of my 'crisis of practice,' occurring a year into my consulting business. I struggled to answer the question of whether my work as a facilitator had any value.

Over time, I came to think that in the workshop we were simply playing our roles in the 'game' of organisational life. Perhaps we (Bob and Sarah, Brendan and his team, Samantha and I) all knew that we were discussing 'fictional' concepts, but we were colluding in a workshop, whose goal was just to ensure it took place, to 'tick off the box' and to confirm that we had cascaded the new model and could then move on to our more pressing activities? Mowles writes about this idea of a game, suggesting: 'complex games are being played as people co-operate and compete together to get things done' (Mowles, 2011: 44). At NEWTECH, I imagine that Brendan wanted to prove to Bob and Sarah that he had followed the corporate cascade process, and I wanted to prove my worth as a facilitator in order to secure further contracts, while we all realised that the workshop did not actually achieve anything.

Andre Spicer writes critically about management, claiming that this kind of workshop uses language which he calls 'bullshit,' defined as: 'discourse which is created, circulated, and consumed with little respect for or relationship to reality' (Spicer, 2013: 654). Recalling the PowerPoint slides and the abstract terms like 'empowerment' which Brendan's team had tried to question, I believe that bullshit is indeed a fair way to describe the content of the NEWTECH workshop. Spicer calls this 'empty talk … bearing

little relationship with the reality of what goes on' and argues (cynically, I assume) that LD is about 'mastering the art of empty talk' (ibid: 657). He recounts a game that I remember being played in corporate meeting rooms: 'bullshit bingo.' In this game, people are assigned a word or concept to listen out for in presentations, scoring a point for each time 'their' word is used. Terms like 'strategy,' 'mindset,' 'harnessing disruption,' and of course 'empowerment' would all qualify for the dubious prize of being included in a round of bullshit bingo. The concept of bullshit actually helped me to realise the superficiality of some of the conventional approaches to LD that I had been using, including at NEWTECH.

Alvesson and Spicer's 2012 article, 'A Stupidity-Based Theory of Organizations' probes these ideas further. Both 'bullshit' and 'stupidity' are terms which are somewhat shocking and unexpected in mainstream organisational discourse. In the article, the concept of 'functional stupidity' is introduced, defined as 'an absence of reflexivity, a refusal to use intellectual capacities in other than myopic ways' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1194), ways that are aligned with 'managerial edicts' (ibid: 1202). The article outlines forms of 'stupidity management' that 'repress or marginalize doubt and block communicative action' (ibid).

Functional stupidity offers a radically different way of thinking about my practice, far removed from the mainstream, managerialist approaches espoused by the executive leadership firms I had worked with as a corporate leader, and whose webinars I had attended during COVID-19. I find the concept helpful when reflecting on the NEWTECH programme, where members of Brendan's team tried (briefly) to challenge the concepts being presented, but quickly gave up after his admonishment. Lack of reflexivity, the writers argue, happens when people 'do not call into question the dominant beliefs and expectations they encounter in organizational life' (ibid: 1199) but rather 'play along with the dominant norms' (ibid: 1201).

Explaining the pervasiveness of functional stupidity in organisations, the writers go on to explain that it:

> emerges from the interplay between unwillingness and a (learned) incapacity to engage in reflexivity, a partial closing of the mind, freezing of the intellectual effort, a narrowed focus, and an absence of request

for justification. It means buying into questionable but symbolically appealing claims ...

<div align="right">(ibid: 1213)</div>

Leadership models often make 'appealing claims' (ibid) asking employees to support lofty ideals, which, if reflected upon, are just fantasies or empty talk. Thus, at NEWTECH when members of Brendan's team made an attempt to question the new leadership model he was sharing as 'versions of corporate reality manifested in PowerPoint presentations' (ibid: 1208) they were immediately silenced. They then just went along with whatever was being presented, perhaps just accepting the bullshit and wishing the day would end.

I see this often in organisations, and I ascribe it to playing according to the rules of the game, for example, 'don't challenge the boss' or 'don't call out the bullshit.' This is a sort of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' analogy in which calling out the fact that the emperor is naked would be naïve behaviour and could cause harm to the speaker. It is important to note that the term alludes to both its 'stupidity' (the bullshit elements) but also to its functionality. So, what purpose does this kind of workshop serve? I suggest, drawing on Alvesson and Spicer, that the silencing of doubt and dissent prevents overt friction and anxieties, and contributes to a sense of organisational order, at least superficially. In my experience, it is extremely rare for people to challenge the discourse of these workshops, but that does not mean that they seriously accept it.

The question, however, is what happens to the friction and doubt? I would suggest that they cannot actually be prevented. They remain, even though any open discussion is avoided, causing dissonance for participants. I do not think that Brendan's team members were convinced by his directive to let go of their concerns and simply accept the concept of 'empowerment.' On the contrary, it leads participants to experience the LD session as a fantasy-based event, the kind of 'fiction' that Holt describes. It results in what Alvesson and Spicer call the 'large dissonance ... between official sponsored discourses ... and the lived realities of the individuals' (ibid: 1210). Like them, I believe that functional stupidity is a helpful way to think about our experience in corporate LD, and may resonate with practitioners like me.

I will now contrast the NEWTECH experience with another session which took place in June/July 2020, at the height of the pandemic. This session opened up rather than closed down the doubt and dissent.

Narrative #2: Speaking Up on Zoom

As mentioned, I have become increasingly concerned about the kind of models used in the NEWTECH workshop because I think that they largely ignore what people are actually doing together. As a result, I view the sessions I have been facilitating as an opportunity to reflect on what we think is really going on, rather than talking about abstract ideas which feel disconnected from our experience.

An example of this took place during the pandemic, when I ran a Zoom-based programme for GLOCO, one of my global pharmaceutical clients based in Europe. In the opening session of day two of the programme, a group of leaders were discussing how they were coping during the ongoing crisis. Most of them were juggling heavy work schedules, together with their children's home-schooling, worrying about elderly relatives and even concerned about how to bring in food supplies in a complete lockdown. Many of us can, I am sure, relate to that period when the boundaries between work and personal life became more blurred than ever before.

One after another, the Zoom windows lit up with smiling faces as people unmuted themselves and waxed lyrical about how well they were doing and how the crisis was an opportunity to tap into a simpler lifestyle and to appreciate how lucky they were. It felt like we were all 'singing from the same hymn sheet' and colluding with an unspoken rule that we should be positive at all costs. I have noticed this on other webinars – a tendency to 'sugar-coat' our daily experience of life during the crisis, a kind of 'toxic positivity' (Gallaher, 2021), feeling compelled to focus solely on the bright side of any situation, no matter how difficult.

Suddenly Iris, a senior leader based in Germany, spoke up: 'I am sorry, but I am not feeling anything positive right now. I am sick of trying to manage this situation with a smile and I can't keep up this false positivity. I am stressed to death and fed up. I don't understand why people are not rebelling against the draconian lockdown regulations.'

There was a moment of stunned silence as the others absorbed Iris' remarks. And then, one after another, they began to open up about the daily struggles they were facing, for example, trying to continue their work commitments amidst challenging family circumstances. I found

myself encouraging the others to join in, facilitating people to take their experience seriously, but for much of the time simply keeping quiet as they listened to each other in a supportive way, jointly exploring their experiences. I suggest that this is a more ethical and generative way of working because it enables mutual recognition, allows for a plurality of voices to be heard (rather than one corporate-sanctioned voice) and it leads to more realistic intentions and conclusions.

It was so different from the structured, and inflexible agenda that Samantha had designed and expected me to follow. This was an alternative way of thinking about LD and I felt it was more useful; useful in the sense that recognising and openly sharing the struggle, being vulnerable about their difficulties, enabled people to invest less energy in maintaining the façade that 'everything is fine.' This in turn freed people to accept the struggle, to be more patient with disruptions to meetings when a toddler demanded attention, and to find more flexible and agile ways to get work done under less-than-ideal conditions.

In the year since the 'Iris session,' I have worked several more times with GLOCO and participants have shared with me how powerful these reflective sessions were, and how they have helped them develop greater awareness and acceptance of their and others' work rhythms. I have now come to think that this is a more ethical way to engage with each other, reflecting on actual experience, taking it seriously, and not avoiding the difficult topics – as we had done at NEWTECH.

Further Reflections on the Narratives (NEWTECH and GLOCO)

In 'Moral Mazes' (Jackall, 2010), the writer adopts a critical approach, describing the politics and sycophantic behaviour that I had observed over so many years and had recognised as pervasive in interactions within global corporations. Jackall used ethnographic research methods to describe the world of corporate managers, conducting fieldwork in several large organisations. He refers to the 'morality of the corporation,' in which 'what is right … is what the guy above you wants from you' (ibid: 4), leading to a culture of fitting in, following the rules, adopting the corporate narrative to avoid being labelled a 'trouble-maker.' Although he does not use the term specifically, Jackall found examples of functional stupidity prevalent in the organisations he researched, in which reflexivity was discouraged, enabling actions to take place without questioning or for them to be justified.

Jackall's experience is echoed in many corporate LD workshops I have facilitated, particularly at NEWTECH when Brendan admonished the team for challenging the concept of 'empowerment.' At GLOCO, the webinar was consistent with the positive narrative, until Iris spoke up and disrupted it, opening the floodgates for an entirely different dialogue.

Although a different dynamic was playing out in the two cases (at NEWTECH – a formal cascade of a leadership model, with the leader present and running the session, whereas at GLOCO – a more informal discussion without the leader present), there are also similarities between them. The key theme in both strikes me as being the focus on the organisationally sanctioned discourse, and an avoidance of the more honest, reality-congruent feelings of participants.

Making this same point, Jackall describes a workshop in one of the corporations he studied in which a similar kind of unnaturally positive dialogue was going on, adopting the 'cheerful cooperativeness' (ibid: 49), 'smiling and agreeable public faces' (ibid: 51), and 'appearance of buoyant optimism' (ibid: 59) prescribed in organisations. In the case described by Jackall, like the webinar at GLOCO (but unlike the workshop at NEWTECH) a manager spoke out in a way that departed from typical corporate behaviour, and asked the team directly: 'Fellows, why aren't any of you asking about the total lack of correspondence between what we're preaching here and the way we run our company?' (ibid: 152). Iris' comment felt like a similar challenge, and in my experience, it is quite rare for someone to make such a comment. Wondering why that might be, one suggestion is that we are all too invested in the game to want to question it. I have seen leaders challenge accepted ways of working only to become labelled 'trouble-makers,' or worse still, 'lacking in commitment to the company.' This in turn impacted their continued progress in the organisation, a dynamic also described in Jackall's work.

I am suggesting that 'taking experience seriously' means overcoming the temptation to ignore the dissonance that occurs between what we perceive to be going on, and what we are being taught in LD programmes. It involves the courage to call out the bullshit, to say it as it is. As a facilitator, I believe that my role is to encourage the exploration of lived reality, as we did during the GLOCO webinar, at Iris' prompting. Looking back to NEWTECH, perhaps my crisis was that I realised that I had not encouraged that, but rather had stayed quiet and allowed Brendan to avoid any dialogue

or critique of the model. Today I think that being able to 'vent,' or share everyday experiences openly, without being considered a trouble-maker, might in itself be a valuable outcome of the webinar.

Implications of Adopting a Critical View of Leadership Development

Adopting a critical approach calls into question many of the taken-for-granted managerialist ideas which inform mainstream leadership consulting. Adopting a complexity perspective means being interested in what happens when people in organisations engage in conversation, and participate in local interaction, with less emphasis on strategic plans and what 'should' happen, and instead, paying attention to what is, rather than what should be. Through these ideas, we appreciate how, simultaneously, we are all both constrained and enabled by each other, always acting into a web of everyone else's intentions. As the process sociologist Norbert Elias explains, there is a 'web of chains of action into which each individual act within this differentiated society is woven' (2000: 368).

What are the key implications for LD when we move away from mainstream organisational thinking towards more critical, relational, and social ways of understanding leadership? I explore this question, drawing on two writers whose ideas have contributed significantly to the formulation of the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating: the pragmatist George H. Mead (1934/2015) and the process sociologist, Norbert Elias (1970, 2000). I focus in particular on two concepts: first, interdependence and emergence, and second, communication and meaning-making as these are highly relevant to this discussion.

Interdependence and Emergence

One of the key elements of a complex responsive process perspective is the view that behaviour cannot be directed towards a predetermined future state by someone who is assumed to be standing outside of an organisation. Indeed, by arguing against the idea of an organisation as a system, and instead seeing organising as an ongoing responsive process, no one is considered to be 'outside' looking at and analysing 'it' from an objective standpoint. Furthermore, the future is uncertain, and inherently

unpredictable, emerging in many local interactions which form wider patterns. Elias posits that because individuals are interdependent, they are continually enabling and constraining each other. While Elias was not writing about organisations *per se* but rather about society as a whole, nevertheless I find his ideas relevant for my reflections on LD.

These ideas problematise the approach in the NEWTECH workshop, in which certain leadership behaviours were pre-selected for development, assuming that the company's top management could mandate their adoption. Thinking in this way also casts doubt on the possibility of setting a strict time-bound agenda, as we did at NEWTECH, believing that we could control which topics would be discussed and for precisely how long.

The perspective of complex responsive processes focuses on what is happening when people respond to each other, with an emphasis on ever-growing chains of interdependent people, linked together in 'figurations of power,' the term used by Elias (1970: 13) to describe groupings of inter-dependent human beings. The form that the figurations take cannot be determined or predicted by any individual's intentions alone (ibid: 164). Our interdependence stems from our need for each other and the power figuration shifts according to who needs whom more at any one time. Rather than reifying the organisation as an entity, this perspective focuses on the **process** of organising as ongoing patterns of conversation.

Elias' ideas are relevant for a critical discussion of LD, particularly regarding interdependence, and how power relations emerge in the work-place. He claims that the outcomes of our intentions can never be con-trolled. Adopting his views in an organisational context calls into question the basic assumptions of managerialism related to control, linearity, and predictability, and instead focuses on the unpredictability of social life due to fluctuating power relations between interdependent people.

As a facilitator, I have my intentions for an LD programme, but I can never control the outcome. At NEWTECH I was hoping to be evaluated positively and invited back to continue the programme; it was important for Brendan to be seen by NEWTECH's management (mainly Bob, the CEO) as a 'good sponsor' of the new model. We are all invested in what we are doing together, and for this reason we colluded in 'playing the game.'

Having explored the concept of interdependence and emergence, I now discuss the second topic: communication and meaning-making, to

understand in greater depth how processes of relating are experienced in everyday practice.

Communication and Meaning-Making

The dominant approach to organisational communication reflects a 'sender–receiver' model (Shannon and Weaver, 1949): thinking about communication as the objective transmission of a message containing meaning from one person or group of people to another. This explains why corporations typically spend so much time refining precise messages and practising their delivery, assuming that if we just get it 'right,' we will ensure that the positive message that we refined is understood exactly as planned.

This was the rationale behind the cascade of the new leadership model at NEWTECH. If, however, we approach communication from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, the rationale is very different. Mead suggests that meaning is co-created, and emerges in a social context, in the ongoing conversation of gestures and responses which together form meaning: 'The response of one organism to the gesture of another in any given social act is the meaning of that gesture' (Mead, 1934/2015: 78). The idea of meaning emerging in a social responsive process is, I suggest, the antithesis of the way it was conceptualised at NEWTECH when Samantha spent hours in 'TTT' (Train-the-trainer) sessions, training facilitators like me on how to deliver the new leadership model in precise detail. The focus was on the content and how to deliver it, including rehearsing the exact words to use. We did not consider Mead's view, that meaning is co-created, and cannot be known in advance, a view which would completely invalidate the idea that the meaning of the new leadership model at NEWTECH could be predetermined and communicated via a cascade.

Drawing on Mead's theory of gesture and response, Stacey explains this idea in a way that sheds useful light on what happens when leaders 'cascade' information:

> These are necessarily generalized, simplified, abstract statements which constitute powerful gestures to large numbers of people. However, what then happens depends on how these abstractions are taken up in the responses of people in many, many local interactions.
>
> (Stacey, 2011b: 14)

In our gesturing and responding, we bring our social worlds along with us: our life histories, our relationships, as well as our sense of the 'generalized other' (Mead, 1934/2015). This refers to a learned ability to take on the attitude, or tendency to act, of the groups to which we belong. Thus, we cannot consider the participants in an LD programme to be a clean slate just waiting to absorb content. Whatever participants in a corporate LD workshop hear will be internalised against a backdrop of who they are. This correlates with Dewey's idea that what is 'known' is always related to the 'knower' (Dewey, 1929).

We are always thinking about what others expect of us in a given setting. This is part of what Mead refers to as 'playing the game.' At NEWTECH the leaders and I were all involved in this as we sought to meet each other's expectations, exemplifying how we are both formed by and form the game. This idea means that we cannot consider the individual as being independent or autonomous, and echoes Elias' views on being enabled and constrained by the groups to which we belong.

For Mead, leadership is not something that an individual 'has' or 'does,' rather it emerges in interactions, thus invalidating the trait models of leadership introduced at the beginning of this chapter. We cannot claim that a leader has unique abilities to drive change or any specific action, because in a complex social situation we can never know how the gestures of a leader will be taken up by others. While leaders may make 'powerful gestures,' such as Bob rolling out a new leadership model for NEWTECH, they cannot know how it will be accepted. Brendan's gesture (presenting the model) will be taken up in multiple ways by the different members of his team, each with their unique life history and habitual patterns of acting.

Mead's social understanding of leadership presents a strong contrast to the idealised picture of a visionary and autonomous leader described earlier, which is at the heart of the managerialist approach. Claiming that successful leaders are those who adopt certain attributes such as being 'bold' or 'disciplined' is an example of such an idealising mechanism, as is the webinar's idea that one can learn to 'drive, survive, and thrive in a crisis.' These abstractions are generalisations that have to be particularised in the different contexts in which the leaders find themselves acting. What does it mean for Brendan and his team members, to be 'bold' or 'disciplined?' What does it mean for the leader on the webinar to 'project leadership and humanity?' I argue that these are largely empty and meaningless terms,

or 'bullshit,' when used in the abstract, and only take on meaning when moved into everyday practice. I suggest that moving from the universal to the context-dependent exploration of ideas may open up a more helpful discussion than the one we had at NEWTECH.

Shifts in My Corporate Leadership Development Practice

Since leaving a full-time position in the corporate world, and with increasingly critical reflections on my practice, I find that my work has changed significantly. Whenever possible, I now avoid projects like the NEWTECH one with its highly regimented step-by-step agendas, detailed train-the-trainer preparations and abstract models. This is perhaps due to becoming more confident and financially secure as an independent consultant and less dependent on every contract. As Elias (1970) writes, the power balance shifts, depending on who needs whom more. Now that I am willing to turn down work, I am freer to choose what projects I take on, and to advocate for what I believe is a better way of working with and developing leaders in LD programmes.

That 'better way,' in my view, is to adopt a pragmatist approach, helping leaders develop their capacity to be reflexive by focusing on their daily work; encouraging them to share their struggles and concerns, to talk about how they are thinking about them and, by jointly exploring them, to potentially find different ways of making sense of their experience. These discussions may enable leaders to take the next step – but not to determine outcomes, as exemplified by the GLOCO webinar. While this may be a modest claim, (and compared to promising to teach people how to 'demonstrate wise leadership and positively reshape the mindsets of their employees to serve the larger good,' it clearly is), I have learned, in multiple discussions with clients, that this way of working is more helpful to leaders.

As we collaborate in this way, we develop reflexivity which helps us become more skilled at dealing with the challenges of everyday organisational life. Learning abstract concepts and decontextualised practices does not, in my view, change our way of leading. Instead, I propose that we grow as leaders by reflecting on our daily challenges, developing the kind of practical judgement that helps us take the next step. I suggest this can best be developed through exploring lived experiences and in relation

to particular contexts. This is a key element of the pragmatist approach to developing leaders; one that has 'ends-in-view' (Martela, 2015: 537). I agree with Martela that:

> some theories and explanations are better than others in guiding our behaviour within organizational reality ... in practical terms some theories are better maps for navigating the world than others.
>
> (ibid: 550)

I find the analogy of a map helpful, and am advocating for working with leaders in a way that provides them with better 'maps' (by placing the word 'map' in quotes, I am emphasising the analogous, not the physical use of the term). I suggest that models such as the one presented at NEWTECH or during the COVID-19 webinars are misleading: not only do they not help leaders, but they may actually increase their confusion and frustration. When participants try to reconcile their everyday issues with the concepts delivered in a workshop (for example, 'empowerment' compared to Bob, the CEO's leadership style) they find that nothing resonates. This creates 'glaring contradictions' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1210) and a sense of dissonance which often leads to disengagement from the discussion.

Drawing on Stacey, I believe that the goal of LD programmes is to help leaders deal with the everyday messiness and complexity of their experience at work, and I agree that: 'Thinking together about what we are doing and why we are doing it seems to me to be the only way to produce reasonable and lasting changes in what we do' (Stacey 2011b: 19). By encouraging the leaders to be reflective we can provide a counterpoint to the 'functional stupidity' identified and critiqued by Alvesson and Spicer (2012), described earlier. Being willing to loosen our grasp on the unquestioned beliefs of managerialism is a necessary precursor to this. Cunliffe describes reflexivity as 'examining critically the assumptions underlying our actions' (Cunliffe 2004: 407). I understand that this best describes what I was lacking in my practice, for example, at NEWTECH, and what has come to the forefront in recent years, for example, at GLOCO.

Stacey's observation that practising reflexive inquiry is 'an activity which occurs very little indeed in most organizations' (Stacey 2011b: 19) is borne out in my corporate experience, where what happened at NEWTECH is still quite typical. While arguing that developing reflexivity is an important

element of corporate LD, I am not suggesting that it is likely to be taken up easily or widely. Alvesson and Spicer's article (2012) gives an explanation for this: avoiding reflection and reflexivity sustains the corporation precisely in its rule-following, game-playing way, and is, for that reason, 'functional.' It should not be assumed that every client would find a reflexive approach compelling. As Stacey writes:

> In my experience this kind of more fluid, more searching inquiry is rarely undertaken in organizations and suggestions that it should occur are often felt to be dangerous and anxiety provoking. The response I have often found is rejection of the suggestion because 'it would open a can of worms.'
>
> (Stacey, 2012: 113)

Although I am not claiming that a more reflexive approach is a panacea, nor that it will be broadly adopted in all organisations, I do believe, however, that this is the way forward for corporate LD, despite the possible risks in opening up a can of worms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained why I believe that corporate LD based on models and roadmaps such as those featured in the recent COVID-19 webinars do not actually help leaders be more 'effective,' defined in managerialist terms as being able to achieve performance outcomes. I have argued against the belief, popularised by much of the literature on the role of the leader, that such a person can achieve anything remotely like the almost super-human undertakings expected of them. I believe that suggesting that leaders learn (in 30–60 minutes!) to 'project leadership and humanity by embracing your duty to others and by leveraging your individual expertise to help address new challenges,' as offered by one of the COVID-19 webinars attended by hundreds across the world, is an example of setting unrealistic and unhelpful goals for leaders. I also argue that these kinds of idealistic and simplified approaches contain the kind of 'empty talk' that Spicer, without mincing his words, calls 'bullshit' (2013).

Arguing against the idea that leaders have a super-human ability to bring about change does not mean, however, that they are the same as all other

members of the organisation, nor does it mean that they are completely helpless to engage skilfully with others in organisations. On the contrary, according to Mowles:

> to say that managers have no privileged position is not the same as claiming that they have no influence at all. Managers are often highly influential players in the game of organisational life, and what they say and do, and don't say and do, will affect the way the game is played.
>
> (Mowles, 2019)

As a consultant in corporate LD, I suggest that it is my role to help leaders develop their skills in playing the game of organisational life by creating space for reflection on experience. This may involve helping them develop the practical judgement in a context that will help them make sense of when they should step in, when they should zoom (no pun intended) out, when they should stay quiet, and when they need to speak up. They have to learn to pay attention to what is going on in the moment, rather than trying (and failing) to adopt specific behaviours, ostensibly to bring about unachievable lofty goals about visions and missions, changing cultures or enabling new strategies. Over recent years, my thoughts about the way that LD can support the development of this kind of approach have changed. I have seen organisations willing to adopt it, and have found strong evidence that paying attention to and reflecting on daily experience leads to more confidence in leaders' behaviours.

This approach may be risky for consultants like me: by arguing that LD cannot actually achieve its often-stated goals, are we not, to use a metaphor, 'cutting the branch we are sitting on'? or as Grint puts it: 'if we cannot teach any element of leadership then leadership educators will shortly be looking for employment' (2007: 231). Will my corporate clients such as GLOCO feel that what I did on the webinar was of value? It is important to set reasonable expectations of our work: maybe we cannot 'teach leadership' but we can do useful work, as outlined earlier. Of course, there are no guarantees that adopting the approach to developing leaders suggested here will necessarily change things for the good, nor can we guarantee that opening up a can of worms will lead to positive outcomes. I do believe, however, as suggested throughout this chapter, that if our role as leadership consultants is to provide leaders with useful 'maps' (Martela, 2015) of the terrain of

organisational life, exploring experience will surely be a more helpful map than providing them with a detached or universal model. Taking a complexity perspective means acknowledging, with humility, that we cannot know in advance what the outcome of our actions will be, but that does not mean that we should not try and do something helpful together.

In closing, I return to my starting point in this chapter and while I sincerely hope that by the time this volume is published, the pandemic will already be a distant memory, I still wonder why I felt the need to join those weekly COVID-19 webinars? I suggest that the hundreds of leaders who attended them, myself included, were seeking a way to manage our anxieties and to gain a sense of predictability and control. If so, the pandemic was not an entirely different context, but rather an extreme example of our everyday experience as leaders. Perhaps we were all 'playing the game' as we surely knew that obtaining definitive answers was an illusion. Nevertheless, we all joined in and pretended that this *was* a possibility, or at the very least hoped that it would make us feel better about our helplessness.

Note

1   This chapter presents work that was first explored in the author's 2017 doctoral thesis entitled 'Taking Experience Seriously: a Critical Inquiry Into Consultant-Led Leadership Development Programmes in Global Corporations' available at https://doi.org/10.18745/th.22541

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7

LEADING AS PRACTICE

EXPEDITION-BASED LEARNING WITH NASA IN THE CANYONS

Sam Talucci

Introduction

MEN WANTED, for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful, honor and recognition in case of success.

<div align="right">(Ernest Shackleton, 4 Burlington St)</div>

There is no definitive proof that Ernest Shackleton ran the ad quoted above to recruit a crew for the expedition he was organizing to cross Antarctica and to crew his ship *Endurance* for The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition (1914–1917). Even so, the description is so realistic and pragmatic that it is a pithy way to conjure up the conditions typical of serious expeditions. In one form or another, we have made expeditions a part of the human experience since we first left the savannahs of Africa. Today's expeditions tend to take the form of highly technical, deep-sea, or space exploration, or the solo adventurer engaging in a quest that is about both endurance and a rite of passage. Almost inevitably, expeditions are fertile grounds for trying

to understand the roles of leaders in achieving successful and satisfying outcomes. What leadership writers often overlook, however, is the social, emergent, and iterative nature of individuals and groups, which informs an idea of leading that goes beyond individual capacities.

Shackleton's expedition, and the narrative I will introduce below, illustrate these alternative ideas about leading and why they are important in expeditions and in organizational life more generally. My central idea is that leading – conceived as a social process – means all participants have agency; in other words, it is a group process and an individual process at the same time. This differs radically from the assumption underlying more conventional notions of "leadership" in which everyone but the leader plays a relatively passive role (at least in the more simplistic versions). I focus on expeditions because I think they illustrate well the intimacy and degree of risk that leading can present, recognizing that we are all participants in any interaction, constantly renegotiating our identity, adjusting our participation, and making meaning.

A critical component of such an expedition might be for all participants to return alive – whether or not they achieve their goal. For example, though Shackleton's expedition did not cross Antarctica as planned, the entire crew survived some of the most treacherous seas on the globe. Scholars celebrate this as one of the seminal expeditions of the early 20th century (Lansing, 1959; Koehn et al., 2003; Koehn, 2011). This is largely in light of Shackleton's ability to maintain morale and his constant attention to social interaction, which ultimately built the expedition's capacity to respond to uncertainty and adversity. When we read about the expedition members having to abandon the *Endurance* – which was trapped in and then crushed by ice – and begin living on the ice flow, we become aware of Shackleton's daily activities of checking in with his crew members. We notice his ability to assess risks, connect, and endlessly participate with others in the process of leading. There is much to learn from this legendary expedition to Antarctica; the literature on management and leadership currently references this voyage more than any other (though during the same period, Amundsen reached the South Pole [1910–1912], and no one survived the Scott expedition [1910–1913]). It is seen as the expedition to learn most from – not the failed or successful ones – but the one that involved constant improvisation and adaptation. In these accounts, I notice a background paradox of success/failure that is avoided by simplistic

distinctions; perhaps there is even an aspect of *schadenfreude* in our celebrating Shackleton.

Current writing and reflections on Shackleton's leading tend toward idealization and reflect managerialist (Klikauer, 2013) sensemaking, which seeks to produce a taxonomy of lessons learned or best practices (Feigen et al., 2020; Koehn, 2020; Chappell, 2001). As earlier, these largely focus on what the individual leader is or is not doing. What I will be taking up and illustrating in this chapter, is that leaders and followers all participate in leading and that this is the case in our daily activities on expeditions and in organizations. At the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), we refer to sensemaking in our context as the ability to generalize the learning that emerges from an expedition experience as transference. We encourage our students to transfer their learning by reflecting *analogically* on experience rather than reflecting *metaphorically* (Stacey, 2010: 73–74). The distinction is that, in taking up our experience metaphorically, we impose the attributes of the metaphor on our current situation, while transference by means of analogy allows us to examine the attributes of our experiences and identify aspects in our current situation. If every situation is unique (e.g. Iversen, this volume), then we need to pay attention to this uniqueness, and think about what aspects of what we've learned are relevant; this process of transferring learning requires us to think, reflect, and eventually be reflexive.

The following narrative, reflections, and critique – and the accompanying distinctions I will make – provide material for the reader to generalize insights from and consider in relation to their own daily activities. I aim to show how understanding the interactions of leaders and followers navigating the unknown toward a shared outcome as plural, emergent, iterative, and social phenomena is more helpful and accurate than seeing leading as based on singular agency of the leaders. I see the latter in much of the current literature on leadership: the expert leader who knows and acts with a clear direction. This leader has honed a number of skills, or even perfected them and applied them correctly. If we look at these skills, we soon realize that they consist of a number of daily activities that we already engage in consciously or unconsciously. In other words, it is a list of practices that I will argue we need to pay attention to, reflect on and engage with differently depending on the outcomes. This is not about getting the practice right or wrong; that implies an idealized, fanciful state, in which

there are no unknowns. Rather, it is about paying attention to our practice so that we can participate in social life more competently. The crux of any theory of leadership and leading is revealed when you consider how practice is conceptualized, how we enable and constrain each other, and what influences our actions and language. This means paying attention to the role of daily activities.

The Complexity of Daily Activities

"Daily activities" might conjure up the mundane, but everyday encounters become complex if you think about practice as an ongoing emergent, temporal, dynamic that converges and diverges (Simpson, 2009). This chapter does not idealize the experience of expeditions, but rather offers reflections on what is occurring around us all the time, so that – through critique and reflexivity, as we encounter these situations anew – we will begin to engage with them differently. I argue that our daily activities are a constantly emergent series of micro-interactions that, in turn, lead to a series of macro-interactions that will pattern throughout the expedition or organization. These complex interactions propel us forward as individuals and groups into the known as well as the unknown.

General use conflates complex and complexity and although they are inter-related, it is worth disentangling them. In common with Stacey (2010), Shaw (2002), Griffin (2002) and Mowles (2015), I take *complexity* – by analogy from the complexity sciences – to refer to the myriad ongoing human interactions in organizations, societies, groups, and families (Talucci, 2012). In contrast, when I use the word *complex*, I mean what is external to human interaction. Some examples of this distinction would include:

- Organizations are complex, and the countless daily human interactions and patterning introduce the complexity we experience within an organization. At the same time, the complex structure of the organization is also due to the complexity of the human interactions that structured it.
- In an expedition, the expedition is complex, and the complexity emerges by way of human interaction. The participants' interactions introduce the complexity that we experience in our daily activities.

Therefore, the transference of the expedition experience is directly applicable to our daily activities in any setting.

- The International Space Station (ISS) is a complex piece of machinery. The complexity that occurs on the ISS is not due to the machinery; rather, the human interactions and cultural patterns introduce the complexity.

- To take one step further: At this time of writing, we are in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus is complex and the medical responses are complex; it is the human interactions that introduce the variables of complexity and allow the virus to spread and continue to mutate. The complexity of human patterning involved in the pandemic – such as shaming behaviors, unwillingness to renegotiate identity, and outcomes – affects the consequences for the societies they impact. One only needs to look at the outcomes in the U.S., Korea, and Taiwan to see vastly different patterns based on how the leaders and members of those societies chose to interact with the information that public health professionals offered.

In the narratives below, I will explore the emerging complexity of the everyday human interactions that arise in expeditions. However, these narratives illustrate several situations that might arise in ordinary daily interactions – on a Repetitive Obstacle Performance Evaluation System (ROPES) course, in an office, or in a classroom. Experiential learning occurs constantly if we take embodied experience seriously. Choosing to pay attention to our experience offers us the chance to make the learning "sticky" (lasting); it also offers us the opportunity to be reflective and reflexive, which further enhances our learning and opens the door to acting in new and novel ways (Cunliffe, 2004, 2009; Dewey, 1910/2009, 1925/1958, 1938).

Expedition-Based Learning with NASA in the Canyons of Utah: A Narrative

It is a crisp, Utah morning in early fall; my fellow instructors and I are gathered in a motel parking lot issuing gear to two NASA Astronaut Candidates (ASCAN) groups (participants). We are prepping for a ten-day expedition-based leadership practicum run by NOLS Professional Training (NOLS Pro). There are two NOLS instructor teams and two separate expeditions, each comprising ASCAN and Astronauts mentors (i.e.,

individuals who have already been on a mission to or have lived on the Space Station).

By day four of the expedition; we have descended several side canyons and done our first crossing of the Dirty Devil River. Susan (not her real name), my co-instructor, and I are working with participants to minimize the Dirty Devil crossings. We do this because the river's floor sediment has patches of quick mud that require you shuffle your feet and if you start to sink, to use your pack as a floating device and lift your feet off the bottom.

On this day, our goal is to ascend to the mesa[1] via a large scree field of debris that leads to a series of erosional openings in the upper vertical rim of the canyon. This will connect us to our next canyon. If this route does not work, we will spend the next two days traveling and wading in the Dirty Devil, as this particular section does not have sufficient shore-line for travel on foot. The terrain is reasonably steep and yet well within the participants' ability. My colleague Susan's group leaves first; mine departs 20 minutes later. As we start to ascend and the terrain becomes steeper, one of the participants expresses their fear of falling. I am a little surprised, as the current slope angle is only 15 degrees or so. I start to pay closer attention to how the group is responding to the participant expressing their fear of falling. I am also keenly aware that Susan's group is further up the slope, moving well, and will be out of sight and commu-nication range soon. The group offers support and encouragement, but as we continue to ascend, the struggling participant is more persistent in expressing their fear. I call out to Susan, get her attention, and ask her to take a break and wait.

In this very moment I am experiencing what Norbert Elias (1987) calls involvement and detachment: as I am involved, I am taking a detour by detaching to engage in making sense of the situation I am experiencing. There is a distinction between *sensemaking* and *making sense*, as Wieck has offered (1993, 1995, 2001, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007, Talucci, 2012). Sensemaking is a retrospective narrative of daily events to understand a dis-ruption that occurred. This process might take place in After Action Reviews or Root Cause Analysis or debriefs, for example. These process outcomes are usually codified as Standard Operating Procedures, Best Practices, a theory, or a new process. The second meaning is *making sense*, which is similar to Elias's notion of involvement and detachment. *Making sense* occurs as we are engaged in our daily activities, and as we pay attention to this, the *making*

sense of our involvement in the activities changes both how we participate and the activity itself (Talucci, 2012:138). Sensemaking happens after the event, while making sense is simultaneous as part of the action – processes I will return to later in the article.

In the moment of responding to the fearful participant, I am also paying attention to different but interconnected interactions all at the same time: the group's language and actions (support, positivity), the individual participant who first expressed concern (anxiety, concern, shame, embarrassment), and my own (attentiveness, perplexity, questioning, considering what to do next). Critical here is the group support by participants, which in part reflects current ideas and idealization of positive psychology and authentic leadership, leading to excessive positivity (Alvesson and Einola, 2019), when a more pragmatic approach might result in the participant making choices with regard to their concerns.

To continue with the narrative at a critical point of decision-making:

> The terrain is not that steep; the group is aware of the options and has been supportive of the concerned participant, offering encouragement. I ask the individual why they think they are going to fall. They respond that they suffer from vertigo, and as they look at the ascent, they are getting increasingly anxious. (I am perplexed because just two days before we negotiated an upper rim descent with a hand line that was significantly steeper – 70 degrees.) I verbally run through with the individual how I evaluate the terrain and assert that it is well within their capability. I have concluded internally that the only way for them to understand that the risk is minimal is to fall. (I know that, based on the terrain, if they fall, they are not in danger.) I tell the participant to fall right here, right now.
>
> The other participants look amazed. The person in question falls and goes nowhere, and I ask them if this changes anything for them. Their answer is no. I sit next to them and say, "Ok, so you know the deal. If not this route, the other choice is the Dirty Devil, and I don't think you want to make that choice. I think you want the group to choose for you. Well, it does not work that way. You have to make the choice and we, as expedition members, need to choose to support you." There was a long silence. The participant then said, "I do not want to and cannot go this way. I suffer from vertigo." I called out to Susan. She came down, we talked, and we rerouted.

This narrative is in part about how to navigate a conflict of interests between one frightened participant and the rest of the group, recognizing that whatever decision is made, it will change all the relationships within the group. The renegotiation of what is possible to do based on how we see ourselves and each other, illustrates how we are always challenged with aspects of our identity when encountering difference and renegotiating them with the group with which we are working. The vertigo issue had not previously constrained this pilot or their performance, nor their acceptance as an ASCAN. It only became an issue on sharing it in public with the group. One might ask – as I'm sure the other participants did – "Why are we taking the time to decide, and why are we making it this way?"

As we were negotiating this decision, it was part of my and Susan's responsibility as instructors to assess and manage the risks of what we chose to do. (Later in this chapter, I introduce the 4/7/1 NOLS Leadership Model, one of the key formats for the daily debriefs, which faculty constantly role modeled as part of daily activities.) Participants in NOLS expeditions, over its 50-year history, have had several critical accidents, and the narrative we learn as instructors about those accidents is that a series of small, iterative decisions lead to the incident. The voice of Craig Stebbins, my course leader on the first NOLS course I taught, echoes in my brain: "Sam, risk management boils down to one simple question: 'What are the consequences if one person does not make it?'"

I have described above how a single decision-making moment with one student can change the course of the entire expedition. This is a more extreme example, but I argue these changes in course are happening all the time – indeed, instructors joke that on the first day of a NOLS course which is usually outfitting, gear selection is plan #1, and by the end of the day, the group will be on plan #15Z, because so many things will have already changed. This situation is similar to Shackleton's reimagining his expedition and the many projects in organizations more generally that need to be reframed. Reframing an expedition or an organizational project requires a *Tolerance for Adversity and Uncertainty* by all participants, in the language of the NOLS course and its leadership model. In the context of the ASCAN narrative, no group member wanted to hike the Dirty Devil for two days; in wading that section of the river you're always anxious and aware that "quick mud" might show up seemingly out of nowhere. What occurred

was a conversation in each group, and then the expedition as a whole, following which we chose to reroute.

Perhaps because decision-making on expeditions has such serious life-and-death consequences, axioms by mountaineers about backing off a route, not summiting or just changing direction are common (Malloy, 2010):

> And the response to people who say you can't go back ... Well, what happens if you get to the cliff and you take one step forward ... or you make a 180 degree turn and then take one step forward? Which way are you going? Which way is progress?
>
> Doug Tompkins

> The hardest thing in the world is to simplify your life, it's so easy to make it complex. The solution may be for a lot of the world's problems to turn around and take a forward step, you can't just keep trying to make a flawed system work.
>
> Yvon Chouinard

These two quotations illustrate the diversity of choices available: the first reflects the idea of renegotiating the goal, and the second addresses the difficulty into which we are launching ourselves in renegotiating individual and group identity, participation, and the route we have chosen. Both, however, suggest a high degree of choice and predictability which I find doesn't match my experience.

Returning to the narrative, the evening following the choice to reroute was made, we found ourselves discussing identity and accountability. We had found a side canyon in which to camp, and were debriefing about the day. There were comments around the accepted practice of support and encouragement, which has become a prevalent idealized group norm, and the aversion to confront and or introduce any potential conflict. We discussed individual and group decision-making and how to hold ourselves accountable to each other. And how in the moment we can make sense of our experience and that of others. The reality was I was improvising, as I was engaged in making sense during the decision-making and sensemaking later that evening. I was making choices and while aware that it worked that time; it might not work in the future. I'll come back to this shortly.

Extrapolating from this experience, as individual participants, I suggest that we are always facing various risks arising from the myriad paradoxes that emerge in group life. Risks of agreement/challenge, or being accepted/rejected, relating to paradoxes of inclusion/exclusion, insider/outsider, collaboration/conflict, predictable/unpredictable, competence/incompetence, enabling/constraining, and many more. This is based on an understanding of paradox as the realization that we are simultaneously in the throes of two opposing and inherently unresolvable phenomena (Mowles, 2015). When talking about and engaging with paradoxes, there is a tendency, especially in the U.S., to use the catchy phrase "both/and" or to claim that it is possible to split the paradox into its parts. I would argue that the above is not acting in or functioning in the paradoxical state we encounter daily. The "both/and" phraseology conjures a split of two simultaneous, iterative phenomena. Furthermore, splitting a paradox into polarities does not help us understand how to operate in situations that are occurring simultaneously.

Another response to these experiences could be to try to identify and taxonomize actions; I suggest that this closes down opportunities for action by using boundaries and levels to abstract away from contradictions in experience. This is common in systems-thinking approaches, where *boundaries* offer spatial imagery for processes that are temporal, emergent, iterative, and social (Stacey, 2010; Mowles, 2015). I argue that there are in fact no boundaries; instead, what is present and what we need to pay attention to is the ongoing enabling and constraining in which we all engage, preventing people from doing whatever they choose and yet allowing for some room to maneuver. In that case, it may be more helpful to think about how we are thinking.

In the discussion that follows, I will try to illustrate the importance of paying attention to everyday activities or practices, and how our participation changes as we observe them.

Debriefing the Activity of Leading or Leadership

When we gathered in the evening to debrief after the day in the Dirty Devil Canyon, the process involved both sensemaking and narrating the events in retrospect, to understand what had occurred. In a way, this becomes a

further action so making sense in the debriefing process to understand our participation and that of our fellow expedition members created something new, including the possibility of different interaction. This shows how sensemaking and making sense are not that easily separable. At the forefront of the debrief was the participants commenting on my decision to tell the person to fall and my challenging them to decide about the route – to climb or to wade. The group's consensus was that no one thought about a change in route and focused on supporting their struggling colleague during the event. They thought I hadn't been supportive. I listened and then asked how was I not supporting their colleague by challenging them during the event and now in the debrief? I reiterated the thinking I had shared with them at the time of the event. One of the participants then asked if this was a leadership moment and what the group could learn from it. The discussion continued for a while, and then I introduced a question based on the distinction I introduced earlier in the chapter: "Was this a leadership moment, implying individual agency, or was it leading, meaning a group's moment, meaning that multiple individuals were involved in the decision?"

The language around this emergent, iterative phenomenon we call leading illustrates the multiple agencies that are at play in a decision. The outcome is not dictated by a single individual – "the leader" – deciding what to do; rather, it is the ongoing playing out of interaction of the needs, wants, and values of leaders/followers that results in the next steps. Of course, an individual in an identified leadership position can exercise a great deal of influence on the outcome, but so can followers through the process of enabling and constraining. Leading as reflected in the narrative as an everyday practice that happens in the negotiation within a group suggests that agency emerges socially in the interplay of participating individuals. For example, asking the student to fall illustrates this emergence of agency based on the group interaction: my request emerged out of my past experience of groups, what was going on in the group I was with, as well as communication with Susan's group (given that she and I were shouting back and forth to one another in the canyon). What I was experiencing then, and want to highlight now, is this ongoing group dynamic regarding the individual and the group – particularly relating to inclusion and exclusion, which I see as paradoxical using the definition I introduced earlier. As I was negotiating with the group about the best course of action, various

choices arising out of paradoxes I was experiencing were racing through my mind: Will the group accept/reject me? Will the group experience me as an insider/outsider? Will the members judge me competent/incompetent? And how will the group renegotiate my identity and the group's identity in this moment?

Ralph Stacey – even though he uses the word *leadership* whereas I prefer leading to emphasize the relationality of the process – explains how we might think of leading as practical activity and how we might engage with it differently:

> [T]he practice of effective leadership [effectively leading] is that of participating skillfully in interactions with others in reflective and imaginative ways, aware of the potentially destructive processes one may be caught up in. It is in this practice of immersing while abstracting from the games of organizations that one is recognized as a leader, as one who has the capacity to assist the group to continue acting ethically, creatively and courageously into the unknown.
>
> (Stacey, 2010: 217)

What Stacey is portraying – and I experience within the ASCAN group – is this ongoing interplay of the social, which is continuously emerging and being iterated in groups, and the process of paying attention to this phenomenon as well as communication about it that allows for the group to move into the unknown. I had some hunches as to how this choice between the steep hill and the river might play out, and at the same time, the individual and the group's responses were unknown to me, as were the details of the risks we might face in the subsequent two days. What I am offering is a pragmatic view and practical knowledge of how we might engage in leading people into the unknown that can only be partially anticipated. I am taking up the attributes that emerge as we interact, which allows us to reflect analogically and apply this practical knowledge to our current circumstances.

Sensemaking, Making Sense, and Making Judgments

When I described the developing conversation that emerged around falling, including my direction to the participant to go ahead and fall to see if it

would reduce their fear, I made a distinction between sensemaking and making sense. I'd like to expand on this further. In Stacey's quote earlier, he talks about the practice of immersing while abstracting. This practice is an ongoing attribute of human functioning that generally occurs for us unobserved; we engage in it unconsciously. Indeed, if we were conscious of this all the time, it might be exhausting. And yet there is value in paying attention to our process of being immersed in our ongoing activities and abstracting, and being aware that we are always doing it: this practice changes our participation in whatever we are involved in as we navigate through how to participate in groups, make decisions, and communicate decisions. Immersing and abstracting involve a paradox, just one of many that are ever present in the ongoing negotiation of identity I have been discussing. I suggest that paying attention to the paradox of involvement and detachment, and engaging in making sense, are critical aspects of leading.

Elias (1987) writes about the ongoing cycles of simultaneous involved detachment and detached involvement we get involved in and also portrays this as a paradoxical iterative phenomenon (as cited by (Talucci, 2014a, 2014b)). I have elaborated on this elsewhere:

> This process, which might or might not occur unobserved by us, propels us forward as we participate with others, receive input, create input, think, reflect, detach/abstract, continue to participate in what Griffin calls the "... nonlinear, circular participation in the negotiation of meaning" (Griffin, 2002: 167). The crux of Elias's and Griffin's work is that you are always involved; there is not some idealized state of detachment (i.e., the unaffected observer/leader in some way standing outside or removed from the events, moving from the dance floor to the balcony (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz and Linsky, 2002)). You are in the mix of struggling to make sense for yourself and others ... To be both involved in what we are doing and at the same time to become detached, what Elias (1987) refers to as involved detachment or a "detour via detachment"; what is critical to realize is that they are the same practice.
>
> (ibid)

It is this ability to pay attention to our involvement and detachment in everyday practice that helps us develop and understand how to make practical judgments or phronesis.

Numerous authors discuss phronesis and judgment in critiquing current thinking and its rationalist approach to leading and decision-making (e.g. Shotter and Tsoukas (2014); Chia and Holt (2006); Stacey (2001); Burkitt (1999); Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986); Elias (1978, 1991, 1939/2000); and Dewey (1925/1958)). The term phronesis originates from Aristotle, who offered the following distinctions: Episteme as analytical and scientific knowledge; Techne as technical knowledge or know-how; and Phronesis as practical knowledge contextualized to a particular situation at a particular time. It is this practical knowledge, emergent from both past and present experience that informs how we choose to deal with new situations that I find most helpful in illuminating how we deal with participants' concerns, and the judgments and decisions we make as a group.

In the expedition narrative, many in the group chose to encourage the participant to continue ascending, to buoy them up with encouragement. As the participants were encouraging their colleague, I was reflecting on the oral history of mountaineering and how accidents happen through a series of small decisions and thinking about the possible risks that might arise. The group as it participated in the encouragement of their colleague was probably assuming that this supportive approach was likely to result in the outcome they hoped for – that the fearful participant would choose to ascend the scree field. I have experienced this time and again as the group uses encouragement to achieve an outcome; but there is a fine line between encouragement and shaming, especially when the individual is not able to actualize the encouragement "you can do it!" With the emergence of this sense of a fine line comes the potential for creating a critical event; in other words, it can have an impact on risk management. Practical judgment in that moment of decision-making required more detachment from the hopes of the majority to a consideration of risk. As the events unfolded in the canyon, it became clear that the negotiation with the fearful participant meant paying attention to the diverse micro-interactions and escalation of small changes.

A Practical Model for Leading: Four Roles, Seven Skills, and One Style

At NOLS, we have focused our collective attention on reflection by means of what we call the 4/7/1 Leadership Model as a way into conversations

about leading, decision-making, and risk management. This is used as a basic format for our debriefing process and as instructors we incorporate this into our practice. The model has four roles (designated leadership, peer leadership, self-leadership, and active followership); seven skills (expedition behavior, competence, judgment and decision-making, communication, tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, self-awareness, vision and action); and one signature style (NOLS, 2000). These roles are particularly useful in addressing how participants behave in groups – for example, in the narrative, the role of follower was particularly helpful for helping the group to understand how following was involved in leading; the skills are a listing of activities we already engage in either observed or unobserved and reflect daily activities and practices on both expeditions and in organizations; the signature style addresses what we bring as individuals to this iterative process – how we engage with communication, decision-making, and conflict.

The 4/7/1 Leadership Model is what Stacey would call a "second-order abstraction" (Stacey, 2010: 109). It is a way of making sense of our experiences on expeditions, being immersed and abstracting, to help us and our students analyze our daily interactions and experiences on expeditions. I find this particular model on leading to be the most vibrant, because it emerged out of the ongoing human experience on our expeditions. In *making sense* and *sensemaking*, at NOLS we take the social interactions of the day and talk about them as if they have become a thing; we reify them to understand better the events in which we are involved in our daily activities. I see this often happening when a leadership model/theory is offered: we talk about the parts as if they are to be managed and it can be easy to forget that we are talking about experiences that are social and temporal. This can lead to an inattention to the actual people involved, or the particular circumstances in which the model is being used. This can also lead to expectations that models are taught and delivered a certain way, underpinned by a discourse of certainty that if you develop these skills, you will have these outcomes and that participants can exercise autonomous choice.

However, taking the plurality and paradoxical qualities of experience seriously, while I do deliver the model as it outlined in the NOLS Leadership Toolbox, I also offer a critique and introduce ambiguity and uncertainty for participants to wrestle with. For example, I ask participants to reflect how the four roles might be paradoxically happening at the same time i.e.,

a designated leader might be an active follower at the same time if they are participating in the iterative/emergent discussion. As another example, I ask groups whether, if the skills listed are daily activities/practices we engage in consciously and unconsciously, it is about getting them right or paying attention to them so that we might be practiced, which will require us to negotiate the ongoing paradox of competency/incompetency. Finally, I ask: Is our signature style this fixed or is it continuously iterating as we negotiate the ongoing enabling and constraining of group participation, meaning, and individual and group identity? In these ways, I try to make sure we pay attention to how the elements of the model are functionalized in social interactions – as well as enabling participants to exercise practical judgment, this approach also guards against the more pernicious risks of reifying away from experience.

To illustrate this alternative approach to instrumentalizing leadership models in line with a dominant, systems-thinking, managerialist discourse, I will briefly discuss one of the roles and a number of the skills in the 4/7/ 1 model. We can take this up as a list of possibilities rather than a model to be functionalized – and it might lead to a richer, thicker, and more vibrant way of thinking and reflecting on leading as both an individual and a group activity. This particular model highlights the leader/follower paradox, in that we are all leading and following simultaneously. There is a designated leader, and if we are attentive to the patterning, we experience an ongoing series of micro-interactions that are both being formed by and forming the group. These transform leading into a group activity, and these selections from the thinking underpinning the 4/7/1 schema illustrate my use and critique of this model.

Active Followership

This particular role has inspired several discussions at NOLS, questioning whether followership can constitute a leadership role in leading. A colleague named Bob Schoultz, a Navy, Cpt. Ret. and former SEAL, refers to this as "managing your boss". An expedition participant will ask, "Why do we have this as a role?" We explain that this role means no one is absolved of the responsibilities of leading; we are illustrating that both the designated leader and the active followers are accountable for the outcome.

The narrative earlier about ascending the canyon debris field illustrates the relationality of leading. I describe the interplay of support micro-interactions and, eventually, my choice to tell the participant to go ahead and fall, which creates an interruption in the thinking and the group dynamics. There is renegotiation of aspects of both group identities and individual identities, such as the individual participant having to share their issues about vertigo, the group's renegotiation around support and challenge, and deciding to reroute. There is an ongoing renegotiation with regard to competence/incompetence for both individuals and the group. As we made the choice to reroute, there were known and unknown aspects to the route. This series of interactions changed the dynamics of this group and the expedition. In this case, it led to a more dynamic and challenging route, which allowed for additional learning. By the end, this series of interactions, choices, and outcomes did not conform to any predictable or linear script. The reflection here is that we are in multiple roles at the same time – designated leadership, peer leadership, self-leadership, and active followership – and the crux to understanding "roles" is to consider how we are paying attention to our participation. This is as true in organizational life as it is on expeditions.

Communication

Feedback as a process is a critical component of the communication models we teach at NOLS which are all based on a sender–receiver, cybernetic, binary cascading model. Inherent in these models is the idea of a correct and incorrect way of communicating. I see communication more in line with what Mead (1934/2015) calls gestures and responses – where meaning is iterative and emergent in social experience. Simpson (2009) argues that taking up Mead's perspective on communication is a necessary, critical change in approach to both leading and leadership development. This leads me again to teach communication differently: rather than suggesting there are right or wrong ways to communicate, I invite participants to be attentive and reflect on the gestures that each of us are making and how they have impact on the group. I have also incorporated this methodology of being attentive to communicating into my own practice of leading. As faculty who are leading/following debriefs, coaching an expedition's participants

in decision-making and attending to the vagaries of group life, the ability to pay attention to iterative, emergent, ongoing communication allows the experience of this plural, social aspect of leading.

This method of paying attention to communicating connects with the paradox of involvement and detachment that Elias (1987) describes. As we interact, communicate, and are abstracting as we are involved, both our understanding and participation change. Here I am illustrating the complexity of processes involved as human beings interact with one another, which links back to taking our experience seriously and paying attention to patterns in our daily activities as well as continuities and shifts in patterning over time. Again, this is as relevant to organizational life as it is to expeditions.

Expedition Behavior

Expedition behavior is another essential aspect of our leadership model. Paul Petzoldt, founder of NOLS, was on the American Karakoram Expedition to K2 in 1938 in the Karakoram, Pakistan. The cream of the crop of American mountaineers had been assembled, but this exceptionally talented group never summited. As he reflected on his experience and played back the group interaction, Petzoldt realized that inattention to the relationality of leading may have prevented the expedition from achieving its goal. Petzoldt (1974) describes what he means by "Good Expedition Behavior" in *The New Wilderness Handbook* (Petzoldt, 1974: 168):

> Good Expedition Behavior is an awareness of the relationship of individual to individual, individual to the group, group to the individual, group to other groups, individual and group to the multiple uses of the region, individual and group to administrative agencies, and individual and groups to the local populace. It is this awareness plus the motivation and character to be concerned for others in every respect as one is for oneself.

So, the K2 expedition remained a collection of talented individuals each of whom continued to function individually. It never became the expedition it needed to be because the group members never saw the expedition's success as belonging to anyone but themselves individually.

This idea of group behavior is not limited to expeditions; French and Bell (1999) take this up as "On-the-Job Behavior" or "Work Behavior" in an organizational setting. I am not suggesting that we have a positivity bias view and that this will ensure success. Expedition behavior/work behavior is the complexity (created by the processes of human interactions) present on expeditions, in organizations, and societies, which leads to outcomes that might be both satisfying and unsatisfying. Expedition behavior is not about going along to get along; it is about holding oneself accountable, including to the group, and holding the group accountable, just as they hold you accountable. This paying attention to how we enable and constrain each other – as we participate with others, receive input, create input, think, reflect, and detach/abstract – is a nonlinear, circular process of creating meaning, in regard to what we think we are doing together and renegotiating our individual and group identity. Expedition behavior is not, therefore, a thing to be managed. Rather, it is an ongoing emergent social phenomenon that we strive to pay attention to, reflect on, and engage in our daily activities.

When I am working with clients in organizations, and the conversation comes around to culture, I ask about the organization's work behavior (or equivalent to expedition behavior). This offers them a way of starting to think about the social, emergent, iterative nature of culture, work behavior, and decision-making. This allows me to illustrate how leading emerges in a similar way if we are paying attention to the processes in which we are participating.

Judgment and Decision-Making, Tolerance for Adversity and Uncertainty

Like the communication models, the decision-making models that we teach on expeditions are also based on a sender–receiver, cybernetic, binary cascading model, meaning they are set up if followers have the requisite knowledge for each task. These basic models are a good starting place for a novice in a mountaineering or wilderness setting. The risk is that they apply the model or theory and think of them as based on the assumption that there is a right way and a wrong way to act. In this teaching setting, they are developing the ability to apply the models, and in regard to risk,

to inform individual and group judgment, and decision-making. The crux, however, is developing practical judgment, which is not the mere application of a theory or model. Practical judgment (phronesis) develops as we engage with each other in day-to-day activities and gain experience about the specific and the general patterns; it emerges in the ongoing interactions of *sensemaking* and *making sense*.

Tolerance for adversity and uncertainty or, more commonly, resilience, is a skill that emerges as an iterative process as we engage with others. The skill is both individual and social. My argument here is similar to Mead's in *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934/2015): how our mind, identity, and the groups in which we participate are all emergent and interact with each other simultaneously. So, on an expedition, the individuals and the expedition's tolerance are interconnected. This does not mean that all individuals will have the same capacity. This particular skill is about functioning in an ongoing, chronic paradox. Collins (2001) in his classic *Good to Great* describes how Stockdale wrote about combining just enough optimism with realism in what has become known as the "Stockdale Paradox": "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be." Victor Frankl, writing about his experiences at the Auschwitz concentration camp in *Man's Search for Meaning*, also described the dangers of too much hope:

> The death rate in the week between Christmas, 1944, and New Year's, 1945, increased in camp beyond all previous experience. In [the chief doctor of the concentration camp's] opinion, the explanation for this increase did not lie in the harder working conditions or the deterioration of our food supplies or a change of wealth or new epidemics. It was simply that the majority of the prisoners had lived in the naive hope that they would be home again by Christmas. As the time drew near and there was no encouraging news, the prisoners lost courage and disappointment overcame them. This had a dangerous influence on their powers of resistance and a great number of them died.
>
> (Frankl, 1985: 97)

Frankl developed the idea of tragic optimism, the ability to simultaneously remain optimistic and yet continue to remain in the tragedy of our

circumstances. I see this as a highly pragmatic view of how we might pay attention to and develop the capacity to increase our tolerance for adversity, and acknowledge the paradoxes in our experience. In this way, we develop our practical judgment, abstract from our involvement, and make judgments and decisions that may lead to satisfying outcomes for our group, expedition, or organization.

Conclusion

> To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry – these are the essentials of thinking.
>
> (Dewey, (1910/2009))

Doubt is not generally part of the lexicon associated with leadership development or leading. The doubt I offer is to question our thinking in the domain of leadership development: what if much of what is currently said about leading (see Iverson; Bartle; and Moshayof, this volume) and the interpretations of what we think we are doing together it informs, might not lead to satisfying outcomes for an expedition, an organization, or a society? This raises a question about how we make sense of the complexity inherent in our daily activities. I do not think that a s-thinking, managerialist approach offers us new, novel, thicker, and richer ways to make sense of the human condition. The challenge is our willingness to raise doubt in regard to the current thinking in our organizations. At the very minimum, we should examine what is constraining us and reflect on what might or might not be occurring in the organization, for which doubt is an invaluable starting point.

I am mindful not to create yet another taxonomy or an idealization that, if the reader engages in certain activities and thinking, it will lead to excellent leading. I have sought to illustrate the challenge we all face in developing expertise and contextual knowledge, and at the same time, being open to the emergent novelty that is always present when working in groups. How we talk about the weather at NOLS – an organization managing expeditions – offers an excellent analogy. On NOLS courses, rather than referring to it as "good" or "bad", we anthropomorphize the weather by referring to it as the third or fourth instructor. I tell students that the weather is not "good" or "bad"; it is simply "more" or "less robust". Here I am pointing to our tendency to move to a dualistic moral/value

judgment, such as, for example, healthy/unhealthy, toxic/benign. These binaries, informed by moralistic choices, only serve to constrain how we might engage in a richer contextual way, unencumbered by a false choice. Therefore, in eschewing these false choices we can find greater possibilities in how we might engage with this thinking.

This chapter illustrates that leadership development/leading are difficult to achieve by merely adopting a model or a theory, without contextual knowledge and an understanding of our own mindset. I inquired into what leading entails through the example of being the instructor on expeditions which meant continually assessing risks. The negotiation of decisions in such expeditions can be especially fraught, given that some choices may be more likely to result in injury or even death, so this allows an exploration of processes that occur in any group but in magnified intensity in this specific example.

In taking up our 4/7/1 Leadership Model, I offer an approach to deploy, which in this case emerges out of practical knowledge and experience on expeditions. I illustrate how our thinking, experience, reflection, and interaction with others create the knowledge and understanding we seek. I do not advocate avoiding models or theories; rather, the use of them can offer the novice/expert the opportunity to start thinking about what they are doing.

The chapter is therefore an invitation to think more robustly about what we think we are doing together when working in groups. It is a reminder that, as we acquire knowledge and skills, we must function in a multitude of paradoxes – competent/incompetent, novice/expert, certain/uncertain – and it is developing this ability that offers us the opportunity for new, novel, thicker, and richer possibilities in the domain of leading.

Note

1   This is a geomorphological term for the flat terrain between two canyon erosional zones.

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8

A GROUP ANALYTIC APPROACH TO EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

LESSONS FROM THE LARGER GROUP

Kevin Flinn

Dicks getting in the way of dialogue

It's Sunday afternoon. The lunch break is over and we are reconvening for the final session of the third and final day of the second teaching weekend of *Leadership and Change*. *Leadership and Change* is a module on the Hertfordshire Business School (HBS), part-time, Executive MBA (EMBA) programme. The way of working on this module differs from that of other modules in the programme. The pedagogy combines experiential, psychodynamic and group analytic ways of working. Whereas other modules have one or two faculty, *Leadership and Change* has four or five (depending on the size of cohort). Few, if any, lectures are given. The majority of time is spent working as a whole group/community, seated in one large circle of chairs. The time in between whole group sessions is allocated to discussions in small groups/learning sets, consisting of seven or eight students, each supported by a member of the teaching team, seated in a circle of chairs.

The usual make-up of an HBS EMBA cohort comprises of a mix of students from private to public and/or charitable sector organisations,

with their institutions ranging from large corporates to small and medium-sized enterprises. This cohort is atypical, with over seventy per cent of the students being UK National Health Service (NHS) workers, from the same NHS Trust. As we re-enter the classroom, I notice that a sub-set of the thirty students present, has introduced a number of tables into the circle of chairs. Not only that, but they have also chosen to position the tables, which they are now sat behind, at the front of the room; a location where at least one or two of the teaching team were seated prior to the lunch break. As the rest of the group settle into the chairs that remain from the original circle, I try to gauge whether this is a gesture of playful chiding, an attack, or some combination of the two. Whichever it is, my adrenaline levels start to rise!

It has been an eventful three days.

On the preceding Friday (day one of this three-day, second and final weekend of the module), two separate, heated exchanges had occurred between individual members of the teaching team and individual students; one in the morning, and one in the afternoon. In between these incidents, we discovered that one of the teaching team had looked at and provided written feedback on drafts of the first assignment for the sub-set of students that they were supporting. During the first weekend of the module, we established with the whole group that this was something that tutors would not do. The group which benefited, shared this information with other students who then shared it with a member of the teaching team. It would be fair to say that some students were less than happy. All in all, it had been a tough day and I was quite relieved when it was over. On arriving home, I got a call from the module leader. Following the session, she had asked one of the students for his reflections on the day and he told her that he thought the learning environment was hostile and that some of the teaching team had been 'peacocking'. She was ringing for my opinion regarding next steps and I said we would need to practise what we preach and address these points with the cohort in the morning; initially in learning sets (small groups) and then in plenary (whole group).

This we did, first thing, Saturday morning. The accusation that the learning environment was hostile did not resonate with the vast majority of students in the small-group discussions, or if it did, this was not shared with the faculty member facilitating the group. Indeed, the fact that we were asking seemed to baffle some of the students who reported that they were enjoying the module and did not feel that there was anything

amiss. Following the small-group discussions, the students exhibited little appetite for exploring this further in plenary and expressed their wish to move onto the next session. The remainder of Saturday passed by without incident. A direct contrast, then, with the actions of the small group of students on Sunday afternoon, who not only introduced the tables into the circle of chairs, but also berated members of the teaching team for the real and perceived injustices they had experienced across the weekend. We waited for their vent to subside before calling it a day. The thing that struck me (as an uneasy feeling on the day, but more clearly as I reflected on this in the days to follow) was the make-up of the group of students who introduced the tables.

As noted earlier, the majority of students in this cohort, some seventy per cent plus, were employed by the same NHS Trust. Although most of these students didn't work directly with each other, some did. The majority of the sub-group who had introduced the tables were administrators, not a single clinician. The NHS administrators in the sub-group were mainly male and white, whilst the majority of clinicians were mainly male people of colour. The following Friday, as I was travelling by train to the Group Analytic Society International (GASI), Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organisations and Society (CLGDOS) programme I was involved in as a student, I wrote in my reflective journal the following summary of my experience of that session – *White, male, middle class, managers, mansplaining to the rest of the community … Dicks getting in the way of dialogue*. I wondered whether this experience in the classroom mirrored the relationship between administrators and clinicians in the Trust in some way?

Initial reflections

Educational leaders … now more than ever … must be … relational in how … they facilitate brave spaces to foster critical learning experiences for all, and … reflexive in how they inquire into their own identities and what they can learn from others about racial literacy and transformative change.

(Katie Pak and Sharon Ravitch, 2021: xi)

During our reflections on the weekend, as a teaching team a day or two after the event, I felt that we post-rationalised our relative failure to explore what happened on that final afternoon with the following: i) there was

not enough time left in the session to do the potential learning justice; ii) the module was ending and it would be inappropriate to open something up without the opportunity of processing it fully; and iii) our best response in the face of such attacking behaviour was to make no response at all. This was not the first time we missed and/or passed up the opportunity to explore one of the altercations that happened between staff and students on this module and it wouldn't be the last. However, for me at least, this incident had something of a different quality to it. My reasons for not stepping in that Sunday were a combination of i) not having a clear enough grasp on what sense I was actually making of what might be going on in the moment; ii) anger that our colleague's transgression of the agreement we had made regarding drafts put us in a vulnerable position; iii) a corresponding fear of saying something hurtful to and/or about said colleague that I might later regret; iv) fear of saying something hurtful to and/or about the sub-group that I might later regret; and v) a related anxiety regarding the ethics and potential repercussions of 'calling out' said sub-group in front of their work colleagues. I will return to these themes and my current sense-making of this experience later in the chapter, but before doing this, I want to provide some context for the way we work on *Leadership and Change* by exploring the use of experiential groups in executive education; more specifically those methods that draw on theories/practices that have therapeutic origins, namely, group analytic and psychodynamic approaches.

Experiential groups I: a group analytic approach

> What especially characterises a group analytic spirit is our determination to create and to protect spaces of equality where in the face of our differences we strive to maintain communication, thinking and, we always hope, understanding.
>
> (David Glyn, 2019)

Group Analysis is a form of group psychotherapy developed by S.H. Foulkes in the 1940s. Foulkes, a qualified psychoanalyst, had been accustomed to working with patients on a one-to-one basis. However, during the Second World War, building on earlier experiments with groups at his private practice in Exeter, Foulkes worked with groups of traumatised servicemen to

explore the therapeutic value of bringing together individuals who had been through similar experiences to support each other's recovery. GASI describes group analysis as a therapeutic approach that supports people to develop their 'social and interpersonal functioning' with a view to 'better integration of the individual with his or her community, family and social network' (GASI, 2020). Although developed as a form of therapy, Foulkes maintained that group analysis has 'an essential affinity to education according to the concepts of a democratic way of life for good world citizenship' (Foulkes, 1964: 64).

My first experience of a 'group analytic' approach to experiential groups in executive education (Mowles, 2017a, 2017b) was as a student on the Doctor of Management (DMan) programme at the University of Hertfordshire (UH). The DMan, developed by Professor Ralph Stacey and his colleagues at HBS, began in 2001, but its origins go back further. When Stacey first took over as Director of the MBA at HBS, in the early 1990s, one of the modules on the programme, *Leadership and Change*, included a teaching weekend at the Tavistock Institute in London. The teaching methods employed by the Tavistock staff on these 'Tavi weekends' provoked and intrigued Stacey to such a degree that he embarked on the relatively lengthy training process with the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) to become a group analyst. It was during this training that the idea for a Master's programme that put group analytic ways of working/teaching front and centre first germinated. In partnership with group analysts from the IGA, this thinking developed into the professional doctorate in management programme – the DMan. That was in the early 2000s and although the IGA is no longer directly involved in the programme, the principle and practice of having at least one trained, practising group analyst on the DMan teaching/supervisory team continues to this day. So what form did teaching and learning take on the DMan programme?

The work on the quarterly residential weekends on the DMan programme involved alternating between small learning sets (groups of three to four students with their research supervisor) and large community meetings (the whole group of ten to fifteen students and all five faculty). In each of these groups, we were encouraged to spend at least as much time and effort noticing, commenting on and processing how we were working and interacting as a group (including how we as individuals experienced ourselves in relation to others), as we did

on our research. Indeed, these two elements were not mutually exclusive; the pedagogy influenced our research and our research influenced the pedagogy. My three years on the programme (2008–2011), directly influenced how I was working with the groups of managers involved in the leadership development programmes that I ran at the UH at the time as Head of Leadership and Organisational Development and the student groups that I came to be involved with, first as Visiting, then Principal Lecturer on *Leadership and Change*.[1] So what are the potential benefits to students of working in this way?

Mowles (2017a) argues that working with 'group analytic methods, as adapted for the research environment' helps manager–participants to learn to cope with three things: 'uncertainty and the feelings of anxiety which this often arouses; thinking about leadership as a relational and negotiated activity, and encouraging reflexivity' (ibid: 1). Mowles is at pains to point out that DMan groups are not therapy groups. He uses the term 'experiential group' as it is 'used in group analytic practice to distinguish a group run along group analytic lines but without the explicit purpose of therapy' (ibid: 7). However, he is also keen to point out that although it is not therapy, working in this way can have therapeutic outcomes for those involved:

> [R]esearchers who may not start out self-aware about how they are experienced by others become more so with time and develop a maturity in noticing patterns of behaviour, both their own and other people's which are called out in the group. Participants are able to develop a greater reflexive ability over time: they become more practised at noticing their habitual ways of being in relation to others because they catch themselves and/or they have their habitual patterns pointed out to them by other members of the group.
>
> (ibid: 8)

The group analytic approach to teaching was subsequently introduced to the HBS, EMBA *Leadership and Change* module in 2009. This means, as outlined in the narrative above, that over two, three-day weekends, cohorts of EMBA students alternate between working in small experiential groups, of up to eight students plus a tutor, to working in plenary, as one large experiential group with all four or five members of faculty. Rather than giving

lectures, the focus is on comparing and contrasting our own lived experience, including our experience of working together across the weekends, with conventional, critical and complexity perspectives on leadership and organisation.

The exploration of the patterns of relating that we find ourselves caught up in during the weekends, offers the opportunity for exploring episodes of 'equivalence', which Hopper defines as 'an enactment within the grouping which has its basic origins … in another time and another place' (Hopper, 2018). Such enactments are often referred to in group analytic and psychodynamic circles as parallel processes, but I agree with Hopper when he argues that this is too 'neutral and lazy' a term to describe manifestations of those things that the group find it difficult to consciously talk about (ibid). On the *Leadership and Change* module, one out of every two cohorts, on average, alters the circle of chairs in some way; usually by introducing tables. Challenges to authority are a regular feature of the module. Indeed, if the students do not challenge us, as faculty, at some point during the two teaching weekends, we feel somewhat aggrieved to have missed an opportunity to explore the equivalence between struggling to relate to each other on the module and the day-to-day struggles that we regularly encounter as authority figures in organisational settings. The teaching team's willingness and ability to work with students in this way is one of the contributing factors to the success of the module which garners positive student feedback both immediately following the weekends and often long after the module has ended. However, working in this way is not without its challenges.

Nichol argues that 'pain is a characteristic feature of the experiential group', but it is 'also a feature of professional training and development in areas such as management and teaching, but one which is not acknowledged' (Nichol, 1997: 93). Nichol contends that the painful experience of anxiety, shame and grief, experienced by patients in therapy groups, are an 'inevitable feature of [any and all processes of] learning and personal change' (ibid: 93). During his own training and development as a group psychotherapist, Nichol became interested in the parallels between the pain that patients experienced in therapy and the pain that he and fellow students encountered during the learning process. This interest became the focus of his own doctoral research (Nichol, 1992). As a student–researcher, he

carried out surveys and semi-structured interviews with his fellow students to gather data for his doctoral thesis. One of his main findings was that participation in experiential groups can produce:

- Anger (which is often expressed towards the group conductor whom they feel is failing them)
- Anxiety (at the prospect of having to self-disclose)
- Threats to identity (as individuals become painfully aware of [uncomfortable] aspects of themselves) due in part to the fact that groups can 'open you up' (Nichol, 1992).

However, Nichol (1997) also found that working in experiential groups provided space where 'things which were painful were often shared by others, which gave rise to a common experience of not being alone' (ibid: 99). Although his research was with fellow students training to be group psychotherapists, Nichol argues that his findings are applicable to managers in organisational settings. He stops short of advocating the use of therapy in management education, but he is adamant that it should involve experiential groups, as anything less would be to short-change not only the management students but also the people that they manage.

Experiential groups II: psychodynamic approaches

Being struck offers an opportunity for learning, for making sense as we work through the experience. By drawing attention to this active and emergent nature of learning process and encouraging students to become more self-reflexive, learning can spill over into everyday practices.

(Ann Cunliffe, 2002: 42)

Experiential groups play an active role on many executive education programmes, across the UK and the world, with practitioners drawing on 'psychodynamic understandings of groups' (Sinclair, 2007: 461) reporting similar challenges to those we face on *Leadership and Change*. Clancy and Vince (2019) contend that the difficulties of working with the anxiety provoked in drawing attention to the unconscious ways of thinking/acting exhibited by student–managers in experiential groups are worth enduring (ibid:

175). In their article, they share a reflective narrative account of their experience of a week-long experiential module that often attracts students to the point of oversubscription, due in part to the fact that the module is often described as 'different' by previous attendees. However, it is this very difference that provokes anxiety, and in the narrative they share, this anxiety comes to a head when one of the students tells 'the professor to "fuck off …
if I want to feel my feelings I'll see a bloody shrink"' (ibid: 175).

For Clancy and Vince, working psychodynamically is important as it helps students 'engage directly with underlying emotions and implicit power structures that are created in the classroom' (ibid: 176). This, they argue, obliges lecturers to do two things. First, 'to engage with emotions and power relations in the classroom' by holding students 'in the moment' with a view to generating '"here and now" experience from which they can *feel* their reflections on leading and managing as a prerequisite to understanding them' (ibid: 176, emphasis in original). And second, to draw attention to 'power relations (e.g., differences of gender, class, race, culture apparent in the classroom; or broader tensions and dynamics that have developed in the course group)' with a view to bringing 'to the surface a tension at the heart of organizations' (ibid: 177). They add:

> For the professor, the approach requires the capacity to think under emotional fire, to withstand the projection of students' hatred and anxiety, to learn from one's own feelings as well as those of others, and to reframe what is happening into nuanced interpretations offering insight for students. Staying in the midst of this discomfort and commenting on its value rather than fleeing from distress is a core feature of the delivery of a psychodynamic approach to experiential learning.
>
> (ibid: 177)

Amanda Sinclair, in her 2007 article, *Teaching leadership critically to MBAs: Experiences from heaven and hell*, describes her 'critical pedagogical practice' as being 'framed by longstanding interests in psychoanalysis, in psycho-dynamic understandings of groups, and in feminism, among other things' (Sinclair, 2007: 461). She describes two very different experiences of working in this way with a cohort of full-time MBA students (who had chosen to attend her module as an elective element of their programme) and a cohort of part-time EMBA students (for whom the module was a

last-minute, compulsory addition to their programme). Her experience with the full-timers represents the 'heaven' of the article's title and her experience with the part-timers the 'hell'. Indeed, she describes how the experience with the EMBA students left her 'dripping with and scoured by emotion at times' (ibid: 458).

She describes the curriculum at her business school as being focused on making students 'masters of technical knowledge' where the accompanying pedagogy 'often mimicked the worst aspects of corporate life: highly pressured, hierarchical in the way knowledge was treated and interaction was organized, instrumental in advancing the power and interests of an already privileged elite' (ibid: 459). By contrast, Sinclair mirrored Reynolds (1999) 'four generally shared principles of critical pedagogy including questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions in the theory and practice of management; making explicit power and ideology in institutional and societal practices; confronting claims of rationality and objectivity and how privileged interests benefit from these claims; and finally working towards an emancipatory ideal' (Sinclair, 2007: 460). Although this approach was accepted and valued by the full-time MBA students, it was vehemently rejected by a large portion of the part-time EMBA students, to the point where Sinclair found herself abandoning the project mid-module to be replaced by a business school colleague who would provide the 'false certainty provided by idealised models and theories' (Flinn, 2011: 128) that the majority of EMBA students expected. Sinclair recounts the feelings of shame and the identity-threatening turmoil that she experienced in having to make a choice between adapting to more conventional teaching methods/content, or sticking by her convictions to critical management studies scholarship and walking away (Sinclair, 2007: 470). Sinclair argues that, counterintuitively, the more she challenged the 'privileged elite … the more effectively the status quo was maintained' (ibid: 470). She concludes:

> The mere presence of my subjects in the programme gave the School a lustre of pluralistic tolerance, which might have repelled more deep and far-reaching change. Indeed there was evidence that the work I was doing was valuable to the School's marketing but not taken up in its substance. Many students liked the fact that I was there but, in the end, did not avail themselves of my teaching.
>
> (ibid: 470)

Interim reflections

The experiences of Mowles, Nichol, Clancy and Vince, and Sinclair outlined earlier have helped clarify four strands of thinking for me. *First, working experientially provokes feelings of anger and hostility.* And this anger and hostility are often directed at the teachers and the method of teaching. We are sometimes accused by students of 'engineering' situations with a view to provoking anxiety and conflict as a form of 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. I have some empathy with the 'you get what you look for' critique, that is often levelled at the inclusion of experiential groups in executive education, but that doesn't mean that the inequities being pointed at aren't also simultaneously present. For me, enactments that throw light on power differentials and inequalities, like the incident in the 'Dicks' narrative, are ever present. On *Leadership and Change* we draw attention to them as a means of encouraging students to observe and explore what is often hiding in plain sight. I contend that similar enactments are present in all classrooms, it is just that they go unnoticed. Such behaviours have become normalised as 'just the way things are/ought to be'. The encouragement to reflexively explore our personal and shared experiences merely exposes executive education students to inequalities to which they may have become desensitised.

Second, in as much as students experience anxiety, anger and threats to their identity; these affects are also just as keenly felt across the teaching team. I agree with Clancy and Vince when they argue that as teachers we must learn to tolerate the 'emotional force of the attack, whilst also creating an environment in which it can be examined and understood in the service of learning' (Clancy and Vince, 2019: 175). However, this is easier said than done. Mowles (2017a) argues that taking a group analytic approach to experiential groups 'requires some degree of group analytic training on the part of some faculty members' (ibid: 516). The strong emotions that we experienced as a teaching team hampered our ability to make effective use of the potential learning opportunities afforded by the enactments that we encountered during the weekend. As teachers, we are in charge, but that does not mean that we get to choose how things play out. From the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, this is often described as the 'paradox of control' (Streatfield, 2001). People in positions of authority are in charge, but not in control. Teachers are in charge, but not in control. Particularly in (executive) education where the provision of an outstanding student

experience is all too often understood by all concerned as doing whatever it takes to keep the students (the paying customers) happy. This is something that Sinclair found to her cost, and it might also partly explain why my colleague felt compelled to comment on draft assignments for members of her learning set.

This also resonates with an aspect of my narrative that I have been grappling with for some time. This chapter started life as an assignment for a professional qualification that I was studying for at UH. The essay was subsequently published in an in-house journal (Flinn, 2020). In that short piece, I pulled punches in the narrative by not including the racial heritage that was predominant amongst the clinicians, focusing instead on the functions that the respective groups were involved in at the Trust. My rationalisation for this at the time was that highlighting the predominant racial heritage of the respective group members would be too provocative, particularly, as we had not explored this in the classroom. My sense-making of this incident as an enactment of potential equivalence had not been tested with any of the participating students, only faculty and only after the event. However, I feel it is not only incumbent on me to correct that in this chapter, but also to follow my own advice and become reflexively curious as to why I omitted this detail from the article.

Sinclair's counterintuitive insight, that challenge may actually work to maintain the status quo, chimes with Robin Diangelo's (2018) conception of 'white fragility'. Diangelo describes 'white fragility' as a defensive response to any 'challenge to our racial worldview' (Diangelo, 2018: v). She argues that for white people:

> The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable – the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation.
>
> (ibid: v)

She further contends that these defences 'work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy' (ibid: v). Far from being a weakness, she argues that white fragility 'is a powerful means of white

racial control and the protection of white advantage' (ibid: v). During a recent teaching session on a module exploring the contribution that senior managers might make to policy, processes and procedures for equality, diversity and inclusion, two students rejected my attempts to open up a discussion regarding their reticence to introduce some diversity to the cohort's work groups for the next assignment. The two students wanted to remain in the homogenous groups that each had established and been working in since the start of the programme a year earlier. My attempts to explore what sense others in the group made of this were dismissed by these students as a 'waste of time'. On a module exploring how senior managers might contribute to equality, diversity and inclusion!

Diangelo's conception of white fragility is helpful to my sense-making of the initial omission of racial heritage of the clinicians in the narrative. Steering clear of the controversy that its inclusion might provoke is an example of my white fragility. It also helps me to see that structural racism was only one of several enactments of potential equivalence elucidated in the summative sentence I used to describe my experience – *White, male, middle class, managers, mansplaining to the rest of the community … Dicks getting in the way of dialogue.* This incident, at least for me, does not only amplify racial inequity, but also inequalities associated with gender, class, privilege, entitlement and toxic masculinity. The exploration of any one of these factors in isolation would be anxiety provoking. Diangelo's notion of fragility could just as appropriately suffix any of the characteristics where the power differential favours a particular group; for example, one might talk of male fragility, heterosexual fragility, middle-class fragility, etc. A group analytic approach to experiential groups in executive education involves creating a space that encourages, or at the very least does not actively discourage, those who experience classroom incidents as enactments of potential equivalence to speak out, to find their voice and share their experiences with a view to catalysing dialogue. I contend that some or all of the enactments of potential equivalence highlighted by the incident in the narrative are present in every classroom, if only we paused to notice and draw attention to them. There is currently a great hullaballoo in Higher Education around the need to decolonise the curriculum, maybe we would be better served by (concurrently) focusing on decolonising, degenderising and detoxifying the classroom.

Third, as the narratives of classroom experiences shared by Mowles, Nichol, Clancy and Vince, and Sinclair show, *enactments of potential equivalence are more readily identified in large group sessions*. That is, not in small experiential groups, but when the cohort is together as a whole. This resonates with my experience as a student on the DMan where the situations that stick (out) in my mind occurred in the whole group, community meetings. On other modules on the HBS EMBA programme, whole group sessions are mainly used for i) housekeeping; ii) lectures; iii) briefings and/or debriefings of planned small-group activity; and iv) beginning and/or end-of-day reflection. If one accepts, or can at least hold in mind, the thesis that leadership emerges, and/or doesn't, in patterns of interaction (conversation and relationship) between human beings, in which power relations, ideologies and processes of inclusion and exclusion are iteratively negotiated in the perpetual struggle for mutual recognition (see other chapters in this volume, for example, and Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000); Mowles (2011) and Flinn (2018), for arguments to support this thesis), then becoming adept at navigating the politics of everyday life and staying in relationship, in spite of our differences, are important capabilities to develop. More often than most employees, senior managers find themselves in larger group settings. For instance, Board, senior team and town hall meetings; departmental briefings; road shows, etc.

During a recent research project exploring the participation of senior leaders in transformational change projects in UK Higher Education institutions (Mowles et al., 2019), conducted by the Complexity Research Group at HBS, the senior managers interviewed reported that what they found most difficult was promoting/defending their proposals for change with large groups of staff. Indeed, one of the capabilities they identified as lacking was 'a greater capacity to work in [large] groups', where 'an enhanced ability to endure the negative emotions that inevitably result from profound processes of change, such as feelings of loss and lack of recognition' was needed, along with a capacity to endure 'the feelings of vulnerability…when they are exposed to their colleagues' strong emotions' (ibid: 27).

This leads me to a shift in thinking that has been greatly influenced by my involvement in the CLGDOS programme that I was en route to when I made the journal entry that catalysed the 'Dicks' narrative and the *fourth* strand of thinking that writing this chapter has helped to clarify. This is that

lessons from group analytic thinking/practice developed in relation to conducting/convening median/large groups over the last fifty years, are more useful, appropriate and generalisable to convening experiential groups in executive education than lessons from psychodynamic, and/or traditional group analytic perspectives on the small group. Consequently, the final part of this chapter will be taken up with a brief exploration of a group analytic approach to median/large groups and the lessons that can be gleaned from working with experiential groups in executive education.

Experiential groups III: large group perspectives

The small group by its very nature displays only the most fragmentary evidence of social dynamics. To apply small-group or psychoanalytic models to the large group is like trying to play Ludo on a chess board.
(Patrick de Maré in Kreeger, 1975: 146)

Gathering ... in a Larger Group can be both personally and socially emancipating. Hidden power structures ... are revealed and interrogating them with others, can change our position in relation to the social world. With the possibility of recognising ... how personal experiences relate to what happens as a socio-political level, we can begin to understand how the context has been shaped, and in turn, how it has shaped us.
(Teresa von Sommaruga Howard, 2021: 42)

At the time of writing, the large group, or more accurately, large group processes that draw on the praxis of Patrick de Maré, are 'having a moment'. The GASI Autumn Workshop on large groups in 2018, the development of the CLGDOS programme in 2019 (von Sommaruga Howard, 2018), the publication of research by an IGA trainee focused specifically on their experience of large group processes (Reicher, 2020) and the establishment and growth of two very popular and well-attended GASI, weekly, online large groups during the COVID-19 pandemic are examples of the latest flurry of interest in the large group. For me, it is no coincidence that the IGA and GASI members who have been prominently working with and writing about large groups over the last thirty years (von Sommaruga Howard, 2018, 2020; Ahlin, 2010; Hopper et al., 2003) work with groups in organisational as well as therapeutic settings. Small-group processes are apt for therapy, but as Mowles points out earlier, executive education is not therapy. The vast majority of executive education programmes provide

neither the space nor the appropriately qualified staff to work therapeutic-ally.[2] Consequently, I contend that executive educators should avoid psycho-analytic interpretations of events that draw on group analytic perspectives of the small group. It is not that familial and/or interpersonal dynamics are not present in median/large groups, but rather that it is neither helpful nor appropriate to offer familial interpretations of group dynamics on educa-tional programmes. Instead of highlighting enactments of potential equiva-lence that mirror familial relationships and/or 'interpersonal' themes, executive education should focus on exploring enactments of potential cul-tural and socio-political equivalence.

The CLGDOS programme is based on the philosophy and method-ology of Patrick de Maré. De Maré was a member of the original group that formed the Group Analytic Society (now GASI) with Foulkes in 1952 and the IGA in 1971 and he went on to found both the large and median group sections of the IGA in 1984 and 1992, respectively (Lenn and Stefano, 2018). De Maré developed his approach to large groups, in collaboration with Lionel Kreeger at the Halliwick Hospital where they worked with all involved (patients and staff) as a therapeutic com-munity. De Maré came to see the large group as a way 'to both socialise the individual and humanise society' (ibid: xxv) and as 'one of the best educational formats for developing mature citizenship' (Ahlin, 2010: 255). However, unlike conventional perspectives on leadership, where (corporate) citizenship is often portrayed as aligning oneself with the visions, missions and values espoused by (senior) manager-leaders, the mature citizenship that de Maré speaks of involves challenging the *status quo*, particularly where the status quo maintains structures that are unjust, unequal and unthinking. In small (group analytic) group therapy, relating what is happening in the group to the socio-political is often interpreted as a defence against the anxiety of exploring the personal/interpersonal. I contend that relating the enactments that occur in experiential groups on executive education programmes to the individual/interpersonal, is a defence against the anxiety of exploring the structural inequalities that pervade our institutions and organisations (echoes of Diangelo's fra-gility, outlined earlier). De Maré saw coming together in large groups to explore structural inequity as a way of humanising our 'institutions and organisations' (ibid: 255).

De Maré's original recommendation for the frequency and duration of large group sessions was 'daily meetings of one and a half to two hours duration over a period of two or more years' (de Maré, 1972: 106). In setting such an aspiration, de Maré was making the point that working in this way takes time and commitment. De Maré set up a weekly large group that met on Wednesdays for over a decade in the '80s and '90s. Whilst working with this group, de Maré realised that although the group of twenty regular participants was larger than a typical group analytic small group, the dynamics where appreciably different from the 'one-off' large groups that had become a feature of IGA and GASI trainings, conferences and symposia, where there were often hundreds of participants. Consequently, de Maré began to differentiate the median group from the large group. This seems like an appropriate point at which to explore how many participants constitute small, median and large groups. As one might expect, there is no consensus amongst group analysts, but as a rule of thumb, anything over twelve (the size of a very large family) would constitute a median group, and anything over thirty would constitute a large group. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am adopting von Sommaruga Howard's notion of the 'larger group', where 'one person's large group is another person's median group' (von Sommaruga Howard, 2018: 2). Von Sommaruga Howard argues that it is not the size of the group, but the focus of attention that has most influence on what plays out. In the larger group, the focus is on the cultural and socio-political whereas in the small group the 'family of origin is prefaced more prominently' (ibid). I would build on this to argue that for the purposes of executive education it is more appropriate and useful to focus on the cultural and socio-political themes that emerge irrespective of whether the groups we find ourselves working with are small, median or large. Hence the subtitle for this chapter: lessons from the larger group.

De Maré came to view the median group as a useful space for developing the confidence to speak out in the large group. The median group is big enough to resist the familial comfort of the small group, but small enough to enable, over the course of ninety minutes, everybody to have a voice. Rachel Chazan, a participant in de Maré's Wednesday group, describes her involvement as 'more profound' than any of her 'small group experiences' (Chazan, 2001: 163). She argues that the median group 'is particularly

suited for fostering and understanding man in society' (ibid: 164), a place 'in which moral growth can take place' (ibid: 194). I agree with Chazan when she argues 'it is likely that the large group, and particularly the ongoing median group furthers development of [one's] capacity' (ibid: 194) for mature citizenship. My involvement in the CLGDOS median group over the last two years has certainly catalysed a shift in my thinking/ practice. In my immediate reflections of the 'Dicks' incident, earlier in this chapter, I categorised the introduction of tables into the circle of chairs as a familiar challenge to the teaching faculty's authority. My growing experience as a convenor of median groups has involved a shift in my focus. Rather than concentrating on my own experience as an authority figure on *Leadership and Change*, I am curious to understand how such enactments of potential equivalence[3] are being taken up by others in the group and what sense is being made of this. For me, small and median experiential groups run along group analytic perspectives of the large group, provide participants with opportunities to develop the courage and confidence needed to speak up and speak out in other arenas. That is, to have a voice in the organisations and societies in which we work and live; to develop our capacity for mature citizenship. And in those spaces where we already have a voice, this involves becoming an ally to those who are prevented and/or struggling to finding theirs.

For de Maré, mature citizenship is not about the pursuit of harmony, consensus or compromise, but rather it is about recognising and working with the differences we bring with a view to developing an understanding of how we might go on together without negating or concealing diversity. However, this does not rule out the potential for our ways of thinking to shift as we witness the testimony of others. De Maré's belief was that if we can share something of our differences and work with the energy borne of the frustration and hate, then we might find ourselves engaging in dialogue. We may never consider each other as friends, but we might experience a state of *koinonia*, that is, impersonal fellowship (de Maré et al., 1991/2018). For von Sommaruga Howard, *koinonia*, if we experience it at all, comes in 'waves that ebb and flow' and it is not a destination, but a possibility (von Sommaruga Howard, 2019, unpublished). She argues that the large group is a space for 'challenging accepted hierarchies, enabling people to throw light on hidden social controls so that they cease to be invisible and can be thought about'. However, she further cautions that this 'can be seen as

a subversive activity generating many defences' (ibid). Maxwell, another veteran of de Maré's Wednesday group, describes the experience of coming together to engage in dialogue:

> [T]he ultimate task for us was to discover at what stage dialogue would have done its work. When would we have transformed hatred? Gradually the realisation dawned on us that the work would never be completed, because there would never be a time when I, or anyone else, would be totally at one with life, and that, therefore, we would have to learn some form of dialogue with life, and with others, for the rest of our days.
>
> (Maxwell, 2000: 40)

The ambivalence and uncertainty, which von Sommaruga Howard and Maxwell contend is ever present in the larger group, resonates with my experience of organisational life. Involvement in the DMan and various group analytic trainings has influenced my way of working in experiential groups on executive education programmes. Consequently, rather than teaching didactically, we explore together the patterns of interaction that emerge in the classroom with a view to identifying what, if anything, is analogous to the patterns of interaction that we find ourselves caught up in at work. This is therefore a process of bringing to consciousness our unconscious ways of working/being with others with a view to developing our capacity for practical judgement, that is, our capacity for exploring how we might go on together and negotiating next steps (for a fuller exploration of practical judgement, see Mowles, 2011; Flinn, 2018; and Talucci and Avigdor in this volume). The exploration of enactments like the one outlined in the 'Dicks' narrative earlier, is useful for experiencing practical judgement as a social, relational process. Lyndsey Stonebridge (2020), drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, argues that 'judgement … means moving and thinking between viewpoints' and it is essentially a 'social and political' activity, 'we cannot judge alone' (ibid: viii). She contends:

> It's only by speaking of the inhumanity of our world across experiences, communities, faiths and borders that we can begin to humanise it. 'However much we are affected by the things of the world,' Arendt wrote, 'however deeply they stir us and stimulate us, they become human for us only when can discuss them with our fellows.' … We humanise what is

going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking it we learn to be human.

(Stonebridge, 2017: 21)

Executive education: lessons from the larger group

The challenge then is to see all people (including oneself) as fully human, multi-dimensional, with strengths and flaws, to suspend judgment (based on pre-conceptions and surface level characteristics) and remain curious about others.

(Ajoy Datta, 2021: 39)

The role of the conductor/convenor is to participate

Foulkes uses the analogy of the orchestra conductor to describe the responsibilities one has as a group analyst/leader of a group. He argues that conventional understanding of what a good leader does, that is, 'lead a group to a certain goal', is the opposite of what a 'good therapist' does, and that is, 'to wean the group from its wish to be led' (Foulkes, 1964: 54). Traditional psychodynamic, and/or group analytic (Foulkes, 1948/2018) approaches discourage the conductor/convenor from overly sharing/participating as this compromises the 'blank screen' they provide, on to which group members' projections can be seen. In the larger group the conductor/convenor's role is to participate fully in order to encourage dialogue that is 'on the level' (de Maré et al., 1991/2018), 'opening up the conversation in the interest of the emergence of new meaning' (Stacey, 2012: 153). *Approaches to conducting/convening larger groups provide useful lessons for leading in organisations and society* (see Flinn, 2023, forthcoming).

Larger groups facilitate the collective exploration of what it means to be human

Stonebridge, after Arendt, argues 'to think in dark times is not to retreat from the business of being human, but to discover new forms of humanity in dialogue with others – particularly with people whose beliefs you may not share' (Stonebridge, 2017: 21). The exercise of practical judgement is a social, relational process which along with sense-making and reflexivity

contributes to what I have described elsewhere as 'reflexive curiosity' (Flinn, 2018). *The larger group is a space for the development of the capacity for reflexive curiosity.*

Learning to speak out in the larger group takes time

Confining working as a larger group to one or two sessions over the course of an EMBA/Master's programme is inadequate for supporting executive education students to scratch the surface of the cultural and socio-political contexts in which they find themselves, let alone to explore how they might go about playing into them in a way that might bring about more inclusive ways of learning, leading and living. *Larger groups should be a regular fixture on executive education programmes.*

Small/median groups prepare participants for working in larger groups

Von Sommaruga Howard argues that ongoing participation in a large group 'takes time, courage and practice' as one learns to cope 'with not getting an immediate response, chaotic feelings, and listening to what appears to make no sense' (von Sommaruga Howard, 2019, unpublished). She further argues that participation in a large group can often be 'difficult' to the point of feeling 'brutal' (ibid). Small/median groups should be run along experiential lines, as a preparatory space for working in the larger group. *On a typical EMBA programme, for example, this might mean incorporating monthly small/median groups, of up to twenty participants, interspersed with quarterly large groups consisting of one or more cohorts over the duration of the programme.*

All voices must be represented

As stated throughout this chapter, taking a group analytic approach to experiential groups can be an anxiety-provoking experience. As Sinclair (2007) found, this can lead to students voting with their feet. However, after Sinclair walked away from the programme a number of students approached her to ask her to continue to work with them. This she did, seeing this as a victory of sorts. However, segregation does little to develop the capacity for recognising and working with difference. As executive education practitioners and providers, we should avoid becoming the 'Dicks'

who get in the way of dialogue. *Participation in experiential groups on executive education programmes should be core and not elective.*

Conductors/convenors are as prone to getting caught up in the emotional tumult as anyone else

The 'capacity to think under emotional fire' (Clancy and Vince, 2019: 177) requires one to become more 'detached in one's involvement' (Elias, 1994). When one is too caught up in what is going on, it becomes difficult to think clearly. De Maré argues the rudimentary problem in large groups is the potential for 'mindlessness', where strong, visceral emotions need to be held and worked with if the group is to move from mindlessness to a space that encourages dialogue and *koinonia* (de Maré, 1985). *Having more than one person on the teaching team with knowledge and experience of working in this way is crucial.*

Closing reflections

Working on this chapter has enabled me to do several things. First, to be reflexively curious about my practice as a convenor of experiential groups. Second, to engage with the thinking of fellow practitioners who are grappling with psychodynamic and/or group analytic ways of working in educational and organisational settings. Third, it has enhanced my understanding of why Stacey was drawn to group analysis in the first place and why colleagues continue to take a group analytic approach to working with experiential groups on the DMan.

However, as I argue earlier, approaches to experiential groups that draw on individual psychodynamic, and/or group analytic perspectives miss the mark somewhat. Group analytic approaches to experiential groups based on lessons from the larger group are not only more useful and appropriate but they are also more generalisable to learning, leading and living. Finally, writing this chapter has enabled me to reflect on our initial responses as a teaching team to the 'Dicks' incident with a little more empathy. In the time we had available, there was probably little else we could have usefully done on that Sunday afternoon. This points to the importance of heeding the lessons from the larger group outlined earlier. Awareness of the cultural and socio-political patterns of interaction that we are all more or less caught

up in offers the potential for transformation. And if change happens at all, it starts with shifts in the conversation (Shaw, 2002), the silent conversation we have with ourselves and the collective sense-making we engage in with others. Finding one's feet in small/median experiential groups, prepares us for speaking out in larger experiential groups. And finding one's voice in the larger group prepares us for speaking out when we witness a misuse of power and/or an unchecked application of privilege by members of dominant groups in our workplaces and communities. Not with a view to censuring others or closing the conversation down, but rather with the intention of sharing our experiences, encouraging dialogue, recognising each other, enhancing mutual understanding, negotiating difference and developing a culture of *koinonia*.

Notes

1 To support my own development in this area, I have completed a number of programmes with both the IGA GASI. IGA programmes – Experiential Group (2009), National Foundation Course in Group Analysis (2014), Diploma in Reflective Practice in Organisations (2016) and Diploma in Groupwork Practice (2020). GASI programmes – Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organisations and Society (2019–present).

2 Interestingly, the DMan does provide sufficient time (three years) and appropriately qualified staff (trained group analysts) to work therapeutically, but as Mowles argues this is not the purpose of experiential groups on executive education/research programmes (Mowles, 2017a: 1).

3 De Maré et al. coined the term 'transposition' to describe 'the introduction of matters from previous contexts' (de Maré et al., 1991/2018: 102). However, I find 'enactments of potential equivalence' to be more accessible and explanatory.

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9

CAN TALENT BE MANAGED?

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PRACTICE OF TALENT MANAGEMENT

Tali Geiger Avigdor

Introduction[1]

Since the late 1990s, my involvement with organisations has focused on executive development. In 2008, I established my own company in Israel, specialising in the practice of 'talent management' – that is, assessing and developing senior organisational executives. This is now a global industry, with much of the private sector relying on talent management consultants as a key part of their approach to handling and developing their staff. It is widely recognised that identifying 'talent' can help businesses keep their competitive edge.

Judging the future potential of individuals to fill key positions tends to be based on their proportional contribution to the business. Talent management is a process in which the dynamic of power relations comes into play – and particularly a dynamic that is rarely acknowledged: that of inclusion versus exclusion. Talent management addresses, and even takes for granted, some difficult questions, such as: Who are the leaders? What

criteria are used to identify them? Can you develop an employee to be a leader; and if so, how do you assess someone's potential to be a leader in the future?

Traditionally, both client and consultant share the rather optimistic expectation that managers and talent management experts can control and predict the future, delivering anticipated results to ensure organisational success. Every aspect of talent management and leadership development – including succession planning, due diligence of talent in mergers and acquisitions, and career planning – is concerned with somehow finding ways to measure how an individual is likely to perform in the future. The underpinning assumptions are that organisations are systems that function in a linear way; that the talent management process can unequivocally identify 'talent' in any given circumstance; that talent is relatively static and can be assessed in a way that divorces the person's abilities, strengths and weaknesses from relationships with other people; and that assessed individuals will go on to behave in predictable ways.

For over a decade, I have worried that talent management seems to have evolved into a political, discriminatory process in pursuit of rather unrealistic ideals of 'talent' masked as a technical exercise, despite little real-world evidence for its success in predicting future potential. I am increasingly uneasy with the common assumption that the frameworks used by talent manager practitioners equip us to deliver an impartial and wholly factual assessment, as if undistorted by our own subjective perceptions. Traditionally, our subjective viewpoint tends to be dismissed as an undesirable element that should be excluded as much as possible from the whole process, and the analytical tools we use are supposed to guarantee this neutrality. Now influenced by pragmatism, I recognise this emphasis on 'objectivity' as an oversimplification and have become deeply uncomfortable with the notion that an individual's fate can be decided by a process that purports to be objectively reliable. It can be dangerous to pretend that by following conventional approaches we can somehow step outside ourselves and escape the influence of our own subjective viewpoint. Instead of viewing the subtleties of our personal perspective as distracting and irrelevant, I believe that consciously recognising these nuances as a necessary and even crucial aspect of the assessment process can enrich the meaning that emerges from it.

In this chapter I am going to focus on my role as assessor in the talent management process, in particular problematising the issue of objectivity. I recognise that there are wider issues with the whole process of talent management, but these remain out of the scope of this chapter. The narratives I will share illustrate how I began to notice that the consultant/assessor is by no means an 'outside observer' but a participant, one who is both involved and detached at the same time. This discovery completely redefined my role and level of involvement as a consultant. I came to understand the process of judgement as a relational and social process, which relies on practical judgement; in such a scenario, the notion that the future can be predicted is clearly illusory.

While I was drafting this chapter to describe these shifts in my perspective, COVID-19 struck. Suddenly I found myself excluded, no longer 'essential' as a consultant in talent management. New 'talents' emerged; others disappeared. I was now required to assess personal qualities (e.g., leadership skills, interrelationships, resilience) remotely, through virtual meetings. This unfamiliar form of interaction, because it is less intimate than a physically face-to-face conversation, forced me to revisit professional and ethical questions such as: How do I acquire information in the process of judgement? What are the additional challenges when the interaction is taking place virtually?

The narratives and reflection in this chapter provide a critical appraisal of the traditional approach to talent management, examining the illusions of objectivity and predictability that underpin so much of our practice as we filter candidates for leadership. I end by sharing the alternative approach I have developed in my practice, adding reflections on my experience as an external consultant during the COVID-19 pandemic. I explore some of the practical implications for my professional community, as well as the dilemmas we face, in our search for tomorrow's leaders.

Talent management – the traditional way

In the late 1990s, the global economy was thriving. Firms competed fiercely over talent, scrambling to hire and retain the employees they needed. During this period, as organisations grew exponentially, compensation packages became more generous, mobility across firms became easy, and employment agencies and job vacancies outpaced head hunters'

efforts. Even after the collapse of the dot.com bubble, the ensuing financial crisis and spreading recession did not ease the war over talent. In 2011, the World Economic Forum and the Boston Consulting Group, a leading strategic consulting firm, recommended that firms increase their talent pools by instituting systematic processes to manage the risk entailed in the shortage of talented workers (Tarique and Schuler, 2010). These included workforce and career planning, adopting a global rather than local perspective of organisational talent, introducing 'brain drain' prevention measures, implementing mobility-supporting procedures, and hiring from new population groups (e.g., older people, and individuals with disabilities).

Smilansky (2006: 7) explains that 'talent management processes are designed to ensure that the business improves its competitive advantage through the effective utilisation of a small number of exceptional individuals in key leadership positions'. This is a widely accepted view that shares some basic assumptions with the traditional management literature – seeing talent management as a strategic process in which managers plan, control, and maintain the existing hierarchy, predicting long-term outcomes for the organisation and for individuals.

Talent assessment has become a hot topic in the field of people management (Collings, 2014: 301) and leadership, not only in large corporations, but also in mid-sized organisations. It mostly affects high-ranking personnel. Consultants practising talent management are involved in strategic thinking and planning, viewing key people in the organisation as strategic resources. To assess talent, we use tools, reports, and scores to judge who merits inclusion in the 'talent/high potential' group; then, to further develop these individuals, we create career development plans and leadership programmes. In many organisations, the distinction between high potential programmes and leadership programmes can be rather hazy. Often, 'high potential' or 'top talent' programmes are really designed with 'leaders' and 'leadership' in mind. The main difference is in temporal scope: while leadership programmes focus on the here and now, seeking to enhance the competencies and capabilities required to address current challenges, high potential programmes aim to assess and develop a versatile range of qualities that may be required for future positions.

Of course, in judging questions of inclusion, consultants also determine who will be excluded from the group – a clearly elitist process. The inclusion/exclusion criteria are based on who contributes most or is considered

indispensable to the future success of the organisation by helping to maintain its competitive edge (Smilansky, 2006; Reis, 2015). Both assessments are inevitably influenced by political factors within the organisation. To simulate objectivity, much of the literature on talent assessment presents a set of idealised 'core competencies' (Reis, 2015; Collings and Mellahi, 2009) in which strategies are matched with relevant proficiencies to ensure success. This approach uses tools and techniques to award scores, set benchmarks, and rate employees on scales and succession diagrams. Such ratings attempt to measure the individual in isolation – detached from their social context and history, as if a person's abilities are completely unaffected by the current situation or their relationships within it.

Methodologies described in the traditional management literature arrive at a single truth, expressed as a score (number), a relative score (comparative ranking), or a clear-cut recommendation. Yet such an approach to measuring competencies assumes an interplay of factors that are stable, even static; it takes no account of cultural, historical, or social differences (e.g., Watson, 2010) or employment hierarchies (either formal, based on rank, or informal hierarchies based on factors such as race, ethnicity, age, or gender).

My services as an external consultant are often engaged based on the assumption that this will ensure a process free of political bias or potential conflicts of interest. I am often asked to express my observations in terms of scores and numbers, as though this assures my detached objectivity. Increasingly unsettled by such aspects of my work, I have found myself formulating an alternative approach.

Critical perspective on the traditional approach to talent management

After ten years of successfully leading my own company specialising in talent management, I began using reflective narrative as a methodology to explore my professional interactions, paying close attention to my own responses in critical moments during assessments, as well as taking a more abstract view of my own participation. This reflexive combination of involvement and detachment yielded valuable new insights into my practice; and I found myself increasingly questioning the traditional discourse in talent management.

One particular narrative became a turning-point, resulting in a significant shift in my perspective – one that eventually led me to develop alternative ways of thinking and working on talent management. I describe my experience as a consultant conducting a broad global talent management process to assess the general manager of a subsidiary company in a Middle Eastern country, as part of evaluating that company's ability to handle strategic changes and dramatic growth. It is worth noting that this took place at a time of considerable tensions in the Middle East, such that there were travel warnings in place for anyone visiting that country from Israel. As part of a process of acquisition of another pharmaceutical company, my assignment was to assess the general manager and check due diligence of his management team. Our task was to determine whether Tavi (not his real name) was suitable to become the general manager of the merged company, and whether his team would support managerial decisions if the structure were to change.

The final output was to be a report based on the traditional three-step approach to talent management: (step1) analysing requirements, then (step 2) assessing the individual's relevant core competencies and scoring their capabilities in relation to designated targets, in order to (step 3) create a personal development plan. Step 2, the assessment process, included a self-report questionnaire for the assessed to indicate their own values, capabilities, and motivation, and a two-hour face-to-face interview. Based on both sources of information, we consultants would work together to calibrate the scores we gave. Such a process of calibration is vital to ensure full alignment in our understanding of the job, the targets, and the meaning of a particular score; in cases of significant gaps, we discuss the scores until reaching consensus. Step 3, the development plan, would begin with feedback to the assessed manager, supported by the report.

Assessing Tavi: A narrative

From the moment we arrived in their office in August, 2016, we were shown exceptional hospitality by Tavi, the general manager, and his team. I sensed immediately how this welcome fostered a shared sense of belonging among my team members, perhaps even some degree of loyalty to Tavi's team. I remember thinking that my recognition of the benevolent authority Tavi exerted through this exceptional hospitality could

be an important diagnostic factor to which we should pay attention. While I was glad of the warm welcome, I wondered if its emotional consequences might compromise our professional work. Would it influence what we chose to report and subsequently recommend? My gut feeling was that the managers reporting to him might be feeling the same way. After three working days, we returned to Israel and I wrote the report – the first part dedicated to an individual assessment of Tavi; the second, to organisational insights about the subsidiary. For each competency, I was required to rate Tavi on a scale of 1 to 7, accompanied by a brief text explaining the score.

I had a meeting with the division head, Tavi's boss, to present the results. He seemed disappointed that I would not rely on the scores to 'objectively' answer the question of whether Tavi would be successful as general manager of the merged company. Instead, I found myself describing how the organisational context, complex interrelationships, and history made it extremely difficult for Tavi to succeed in the new role, despite his consistently high scores.

After this discussion with his boss, I booked a flight to meet Tavi face to face for a feedback session. While packing, I suddenly decided to delete the scores from the report I would share with him, leaving only the text describing the assessed competencies. This was not just nervousness about the conversations ahead: I felt that the numerical scores oversimplified the subtle details we needed to explore. Such scoring systems, along with our calibration process, suggest an exact science – an objective, measurable truth that applies regardless of the assessor arriving at it. I didn't want us to get distracted into debating numbers, rather than giving our full attention to what was going on in the local interaction. To encourage more open dialogue that would eventually become part of the assessment process itself, I decided to eliminate the scores pertaining to individual managers but leave those of the subsidiary. I reprinted the reports and left for the airport.

By sharing my hesitation with Tavi, rather than telling him his scores on each competency, I allowed for a new conversation to flow. This spontaneous interaction yielded new meaning, as it shed light on the relationships that Tavi had with his team members on the one hand and his boss on the other. As our conversation proceeded, I realised that I truly was involved in a continuous social process in which I could not isolate myself to make a purely detached judgement of the assessed manager. As we conversed, it became clear that we were co-creating meaning

based on a history of interactions and the social and political contexts, including the wider political situation (given that our home countries were in conflict) within which the assessment took place.

I recognised that in the interaction between us, I experienced him similarly to how he is described in our report: a manager who leads the company as though it was his family, engaging other managers based on personal relationships and social activities, rather than on their value and contribution to the business. When I reflected on this discussion later, it seemed to me that I could have completed his assessment process without any questionnaires or interviews, but merely based on our discussion, in which all the issues revealed in the scored assessment were clearly apparent. I could see myself transitioning from experiencing the situation as an external consultant to experiencing it as an employee, a colleague interacting with Tavi; and reacting not from the objective perspective of the consultant, but as someone who was emotionally involved.

Involved detachment as a response to the illusion of objectivity

Reflecting on this narrative brought to a head, and helped me to resolve, my ambivalence concerning individual assessments in the practice of talent management. The narrative helped me to analyse the nature of my involvement and, in deciding what was most relevant, to relinquish my dependency on external tools, preferring to pay attention to what was really going on in the interaction between people. Instead of assessing Tavi in isolation, I was reflecting on the complexity, interactions, and history of his entire situational context. I became aware that the assessment results relating to Tavi's future leadership potential were co-created through a process of judgement that was essentially social. For the first time, I was conscious of adopting a new approach – one that explored complexity rather than providing the client with simple answers; one that permitted doubt as well as certainty.

The narrative is based on a process of reciprocal judgement – my judgement of the client, and their judgement of my company's work, in which I am an active participant, influencing the outcomes of the process while also being influenced by the process when making this judgement (Dalal, 1998; Elias, 1970; Stacey, 2012). As Dewey (1958: 7) noted when

refuting a clear separation between researcher and object studied in the context of daily life activities, the subjective and objective are paradoxically intertwined.

Moreover, our mental maps and prejudices might be more pronounced when assessing senior executives. In this professional consulting process, I had certainly found it difficult to separate my role as external consultant from my own inescapable emotional involvement. Sticking to the brief required me to focus on facilitating analysis of numerical scores from the assessment tools. Acknowledging the potential influence of more human factors meant staying conscious of the tensions between our home countries, the inside information gathered by my colleagues, and my own spontaneous emotional responses that emerged in my interactions with Tavi.

My understanding of communication and interaction has been influenced mainly by the perspective of complex responsive processes, part of a broader critical tradition in management studies. Drawing on pragmatism, process sociology, and complexity sciences, this perspective views organisations as ongoing patterns of human interaction and critiques the assumptions of managerialism that are taken for granted, such as executive development and routines of talent management. This shift in my thinking has enabled me to notice how the conversations I have in the process of talent assessment, in themselves, form a crucial stage in any attempt to uncover what is going on in the local situation. The feedback session with Tavi became the most important part for me to work out what was really important to my understanding. A conversation, notes Stacey (2012: 113), 'is the social act of gestures evoking responses in which meaning emerges'. It thus follows that a feedback session is not a stand-alone event that is divorced from all preceding conversations or concludes them, but rather another conversation through which meaning is construed.

Seeking to understand the history and context in which an assessment process takes place, and all the relationships in which it is embedded, requires a level of involvement that may preclude 'objective' judgement. Following Dewey (1910), and other schools of critical management (Brinkmann, 2013; Alvesson et al., 2017), the question in my mind shifted from 'Is it "objective"?' to 'What does "objectivity" mean?' The very concept of objectivity and the notion of presenting a single, absolute truth was subverted by my reading on the philosophy of pragmatism, which emphasises that an individual observer cannot eliminate the subjective

factors that affect their judgement, (Dewey, 1958), which means that the assessment process is pseudoscience. This realisation is precisely what prompted me to erase the scores from my assessment report, leaving only the verbal description of behaviours.

If we fully accept that no one involved in talent assessment can ever really stand 'outside' the process, then how does it really work? Together, the consultant, management team, and assessed manager are continuously co-creating talent management as a social process that is political, historically situated, and inevitably involves power relations and the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion. Going back to the narrative, exploring the power relations between the corporate in Israel and the subsidiary, the minimal authority Tavi really had, and the history of relationships with his previous direct manager, adding to it the dynamic of power relations between us (the assessor and the assessed; Tavi's future was dependent on me), we both co-created his future. This whole episode clarified for me that talent management can no longer be considered a scientific exercise, in the positivist understanding of the scientific approach at least, since it is a complex process involving strong dynamics of power relations.

Though not writing specifically about organisations, Dewey (1910, 1984) stressed that the ongoing quest for truth can never yield a single, absolute answer, given the influence of each researcher's participation in the inquiry. This helped me to see a correlation between the method of research and the assessment process in talent management: I realised how practising reflection and reflexivity can enhance the judgement process, by permitting the unlimited inclusion of relevant information (Alvesson et al., 2017), regardless of whether it is considered objective or subjective.

Reflecting on my narrative about assessing Tavi, I developed a fluid and dynamic movement of awareness that allowed me to carry out the assessment process in a self-reflexive manner, paradoxically being both involved and detached at the same time. This required a new understanding of the process of talent management, one that is no longer premised on narrowly defined concepts of neutrality and scientific accuracy. Indeed, acknowledging the very aspects that were once dismissed as unprofessional may enrich the methodology, because it takes account of a far wider range of the information available instead of excluding crucial human contextual factors.

Seeing talent management as a relational process, and the judgement within it as an interactive social process, could allow talent management consultants to incorporate these elements as integral to their practice rather than dismissing them as irrelevant distractions. Such an approach ultimately results in a more rigorous and robust assessment that allows consideration of more subtle details, such as the broad historical context through which crucial relationships have evolved (e.g., the relationship between the general manager and the company). Assessing the relevance and impact of such factors demands reliance on personal expertise, rather than scores and scales. Conferring legitimacy upon the exercise of practical judgement and common sense in the process of talent management represents a big step for a field that is founded on formulas and equations.

In the following, I will elaborate on practical judgement and the way it emerged as an alternative approach in my practice.

Practical judgement as a response to the illusion of predictability

Talent management differs from many organisational processes in that we are dealing mainly with predicting the future – not just future leaders, but their expected future trajectory and that of the organisation in its entirety. Once we admit that reality is unpredictable, then the very notion of predicting future needs and potential becomes problematic if taken literally. I invested two years in assessing the future potential of 100 executives in the largest bank in Israel, but when a new CEO was nominated and many services became digital, the 100 'talents', and their development programmes, were no longer relevant.

I am coming to terms with the fact that, as an assessor, I cannot be an objective observer, but will always be a participant who is simultaneously both involved and detached; and in the search for objectivity, by taking into account many subjectivities, including my own and the one I am assessing, I must rely on practical judgement. Indeed, Tavi commented appreciatively that my consulting style was authentic enough to allow for not knowing all the answers.

The concept of practical judgement – which gives us the capacity to determine how to act in specific situations, here and now – is about value judgement, not producing things (see also Talucci in this volume). It is

a skill – or perhaps a collection of skills – that involves exercising moral agency based on a fuller understanding of context, an awareness of the interdependence of many of the factors involved, an ability to swiftly grasp and appraise the situation, and a sensitivity to the use of language, such as Tavi's frequent use of the terms 'them' and 'us'. Practical judgement relies on the assessor's expertise in recognising familiar themes that emerge in the interaction during the assessment process. Stacey (2011) emphasises practical judgement as a 'technique' of spontaneity and improvisation that can help to facilitate the emergence of novelty.

Another significant change in my practice has been to move away from a future-oriented focus when selling my services. Traditional systemic thinking, which underlies talent management reasoning, aims to implement 'a process of correcting employees' efforts towards the ideal deterministic path that has already been rationally chosen' (ibid: 217). In this approach, a linear (causal) understanding of the relationships between past, present, and future produces the misguided assumption that learning from the past and analysing the present gives us sufficient information to predict the future. Clients are used to expecting clear predictions and solid recommendations.

Understanding human interaction as complex responsive processes means taking a different view of time in organisational processes and the ability of managers or consultants to control outcomes, as I was expected to do in assessing Tavi. Any promise of reliable predictions is false, given that all participants are continuously merging their ongoing experiences to spontaneously co-create the future in unpredictable ways.

> If management is a kind of practical and political action, a practice, then time is rendered more complex than the if–then causality espoused by a more realist approach to management, where we are often impelled relentlessly and sequentially toward an idealised future.
>
> (Mowles, 2011: 25)

Instead, the complex responsive processes perspective pays close attention to the present moment, co-creating an ever-evolving future that is perpetually informed by historical context.

Bourdieu (1990) insists that such practical knowledge – which is the everyday lived experience in the present, even if shaped by the past and ideas about the future – is founded on one's habitus. That is, in each new

situation, patterns can be recognised from previous situations and those patterns are the themes emerging in the conversation. I came to recognise the relevance of this idea, which also relates to the paradox of involvement/detachment, to the central act of judgement in talent management processes. The assessments rely on practical embedded knowledge rather than knowledge abstracted from practice. I once dismissed as unprofessional any judgement based on my own subjective interpretation, but now consider it a crucial factor in my assessment at any organisational level. At the same time, it is essential to leave room for doubt and avoid the traps of dogmatism, rigidity, prejudice, caprice, passion, and flippancy – routine and habitual modes of understanding based on evolved meanings derived from past experiences. This is particularly important given that talent assessment always takes place in a situational context and involves substantial risk, since assessors guide, or at least influence, subsequent organisational decision-making.

Probably the greatest shift in my professional thinking, drawing also on critical management literature (Thomas, 2010; Watson, 2010; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016), is allowing myself to experience uncertainty without rushing to resolve it. I am no longer impatient for the 'right' answers; I no longer expect myself to exercise one clear answer in the process of judgement or decisions concerning inclusion/exclusion. Different subjectivities are clearly an integral part of the assessment process, a necessary component in uncovering a holistic picture.

The notion of 'practical judgement' is a useful conceptual alternative to the systemic analytical tools associated with the traditional discourse. Instead of prompting formulaic decisions, practical judgement requires us to pay attention and respond in the moment:

> Making phronetic judgements requires deliberative imagination: emotionally responsive attunement to the situation at hand; focusing on concrete particulars in such a way as to see each one of them as a 'something' within a large whole; bringing forth past experience to the present context.
>
> (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014: 237)

Practical judgement, according to Dewey (1891: 203), is what enables us to gain 'the kind of understanding which is necessary to deal with problems as they arise'. It can be seen as acting upon the wisdom of experience: 'Theory

is the cross-section of the given state of action in order to know the conduct that should be; practice is the realisation of the idea thus gained: it is theory in action' (ibid).

Developing an alternative approach to my practice

Paying close attention to my direct experience, as illustrated by the earlier narrative, has brought about a number of profound changes in my perception of my practice, and my role in the process. The first significant change is to recognise the process of judgement (which lies at the very core of talent assessment) as a relational and social process that involves shifting power relations and a fluctuating dynamic of inclusion/exclusion. The consultant or manager leading a talent assessment process has no control over the fluctuating power relations because the broader circle of interdependencies connects everyone like elastic bands (Elias and Scotson, 1994; Dalal, 1998), so that the various participants are constantly changing and being changed through their ongoing interactions. In the next section, I will examine some of the practical implications of this temporally sensitive approach for my practice.

Practical implications

In the more traditional ways of thinking that I have outlined earlier in this chapter, processes of talent management and assessment are among the 'helping interventions' in which the consultant coaches the manager to 'act out the solutions to a jointly defined problem' (Mowles, 2011: 47). That is to say, jointly defined by organisational managers. Thus, researchers and consultants become advisers on how organisations might better achieve their goals. In doing this, they serve the interests of those in a relatively powerful position. In other words, talent management, as it is commonly defined and perceived today, is a practice that supports the interests of the management team.

My reflections on my own direct experience led me to understand my practice as a social process that takes place in a broad historical context, involving dynamic relationships and power relations. I learned to accept that we cannot predict or control the personnel we assess, as they 'do not fit schemes and grids' (ibid: 19). Rather, 'the interweaving of intentions, hopes, aspirations and behaviour of people who are both inside and outside

organisations, who behave both rationally and irrationally, will bring about outcomes which no one has predicted and which no one has planned' (ibid: 9). This includes my own role as the consultant who carries out what are considered best practices in talent assessment exercises.

I gradually developed a new understanding of my participation in the process of talent assessment, and specifically in the process of judging who is included in – and excluded from – the group of talent. Engaging with the idea that I am not an objective participant in the process of judgement shed new light on relationships I am involved with and how these are linked to the eventual outcomes of my judgements. I understood talent management as a dynamic of power relations, mainly the power of management teams or corporates to control who belongs – who is included, and by extension who is excluded. This has become the key, as I currently see it, to understanding the alternative perspectives of talent management processes and explaining the observable gap between talent management predictions (when professionals operate 'by the book') and what eventually transpires.

Considering the social aspects of the interaction between assessor and assessed turns the judgement element of the assessment process into a social and political activity. We professionals in the field of talent management should consider not only the data collected by our traditional tools – competency scores, self-reported questionnaires, in-depth interviews – as input, but also the very process of data collection itself. If we – assessors and assessed alike – are influencing the process while simultaneously being influenced by it (Stacey, 2012), then reflexivity and context are crucial elements for understanding the power relations involved in both the assessment process and the organisational disturbance that prompted the need for the assessment. The interaction between the judge and the judged, as it takes place, is thus in itself important data upon which to reflect.

The resultant changes in my understanding of my practice are rooted in how people use 'practical judgement' to resolve the challenges that arise daily in unpredictable local interactions. My new approach takes a pragmatic perspective on scientific inquiry, dismissing the notion that objectivity is possible in any process of social engagement, given that the subjective and objective are paradoxically intertwined. It means that there is never just one view of what is going on, and there can be no single definitive interpretation. My experience with writing narratives and reflection

on themes that are important has brought a new tool to my practice that I believe can benefit the wider talent management community. Narratives, unlike self-questionnaire tools, are not intended to be judgemental: there are no good/bad results or high/low scores. Instead, a narrative becomes the basis of conversation, which itself becomes the most important data for judgement.

I always used to ask interviewees to describe a success story, an achievement for each core competency discussed in the interview. This is a very structured way of focusing on what I want to hear or expect to hear, demonstrating the extent to which they had followed the rules and idealised models. The alternative I now offer is to invite narratives that highlight difficulties, things that need clarification; in seeking to understand, I elicit a discussion on why the interviewee acted the way they did, rather than simply expressing retrospective satisfaction with what they did. Probing more deeply into issues of power configuration and interactions with doubt is a thorough way of 'taking the experience seriously'. Our practice would benefit from allowing for the possibility of doubt in judgement – moving away from expectations of 'certainty' in favour of practical judgement, and towards a subtle appreciation of how complexity, ambiguity, and paradox co-exist in organisational life.

While engaging with the idea of talent assessment as a social process, it is important not to overlook the personal implications for individuals involved: when assessing organisational talent, the judgement I pass can have harsh consequences for someone's career. The binary of inclusion/exclusion raises important questions about the ambiguities of organisational justice. Ethical meaning is no longer understood as an external standard that can be applied universally, but as something that is continually negotiated in ongoing interaction – a fundamentally social process, from which our personal experience cannot and should not be excluded. This has significant implications for talent management: I would advocate increasing the number of assessors to more than just one, to increase the diversity of perspectives brought into individual decisions.

To my professional community, I urge flexibility and open-mindedness regarding the way we perceive and practise the delicate and important organisational processes in which we are involved. I hope to encourage a more inclusive view of talent management as a process that is co-created (both actively and passively) by all involved.

Zoom assessment: a new challenge of COVID-19

After three years of implementing talent management processes using this more reflexive, spontaneous methodology, I feel much more confident approaching organisational processes without a predefined agenda – relying on my personal experience rather than on the standard assessment tools. However, the impact of COVID-19 once again challenged these processes of assessment and development, presenting me with new professional and ethical dilemmas. Responding to these required me to be flexible and to some extent adopt more traditional means of assessment.

The following narrative is more recent, written at a time when organisations were in the midst of adapting to working through the waves of COVID-19:

> After a few months of lockdown (during which I hardly worked at all and as a result, I reflected that my practice of talent management, during a worldwide crisis, was no longer considered a top priority), I got a surprising email from a company I used to work with a few years ago. The CEO of one of Israel's largest groups of construction companies had instructed the head of Human Resources to conduct a process in which management would choose 20 excellent leaders to be established as the organisation's 'forum of excellence'.
>
> They wanted me to assess all 20 leaders; design individual plans matching each with the right mentor; and, following assessment, advise on a development programme for the whole group.
>
> Having become accustomed to my services no longer being considered essential, I'd got into the habit of doing various projects at home, and so felt little initial enthusiasm for such a challenge. But I responded immediately: 'I'd be happy to do it. I even think that, especially now, it's even more important to invest in the development of your people; but... are we going to do the assessment face to face?'
>
> 'No,' replied the head of HR, 'Of course not; you'll do the assessment by Zoom. Is that OK with you?'
>
> 'Yes, no problem,' I found myself answering, trying to sound confident.
>
> 'Great! Please send us your proposal. And one more thing: the CEO wants this all to be finished by the end of the month – is that OK with you?'
>
> 'Sure, no problem!' I said, 'but just one more thing: could you clarify what you mean by "20 excellent leaders"? Or what it means to be included in the forum of excellence?'

'Maybe you can tell us.'

I hung up and sat back in my chair, trying to process the last five minutes. On the one hand, the project represented good money after a few months in which I'd earned nothing at all. On the other hand, 20 assessments in one month seemed impossible! I'd normally tackle such a project over three months, with the help of other consultants; here, I would be acting alone.

I found myself feeling ambivalent about doing assessments by Zoom – how would this affect my responsibility for the results? I also felt some scepticism around their real motivation for the process (why did the CEO suddenly want this done now, when such a process had never been attempted before?), and wondered what the assessment criteria would be. How was I to write a report and give recommendations for future potential without face-to-face interaction? Virtual/online assessment inevitably yields less rich information than an interview in person. After a few years in which I had ceased to rely on the structured tools and self-report questionnaires, the first thing I did was to go back to assessment tools as the dominant anchor of the assessment. It was difficult, using this approach, to evaluate the subtleties of how each individual was perceived in the organisation, relationships, leadership, and so on. Later, I felt my hand shaking as I wrote each of the 20 reports, feeling that the method was inadequate for what needed to be achieved.

Whenever I gave feedback to the organisation, I worked hard to hide my surprise at their enthusiasm for my 'professional' work. I felt as if I was reverting to an outmoded form of assessment based mostly on tools and numbers – an approach that failed to reflect the insights I had gained. I would have preferred to reflect on my participation as both detached and involved, in a way that focused on spontaneous gestures and responses, remaining connected to the dialogue and the organisational context in which the assessment was taking place.

Doing the assessment by Zoom, I noticed the loss of valuable insights that could have been gained from a personal encounter. Without directly experiencing more intuitive feedback based on emotional responses, physical interaction, and bodily gestures, I felt I had little choice but to resume the use of self-report questionnaires, with report templates that included scales and definitions of what it means to be 'talent at level 6', and so on. And all of this was supposed to equip assessors with one answer that would predict outcomes and steer the organisation's future course.

Following the questionnaire structure gave each participant (both myself as assessor, and the interviewee) a sense of greater control of the interaction in our Zoom meeting. I recorded the conversations to review later, so that I could reflect on how I had participated. This offered a kind of a mirror that I had not experienced before. I often found myself revising my original appraisal when reviewing the interview on-screen. In addition to the assessment tools, I realised that hard facts – such as where someone lived, or where they had served in the army, facts that give automatic information (if you were a pilot in the Israeli army, it automatically gives additional information) – once again took precedence over my practical judgement; as though I felt the need for more raw data, rather than relying on the wisdom of experience.

While dealing with the professional and technological challenges, I could see how the same different subjectivities are intertwined with the objective, whether in a Zoom meeting or face to face. The main difference was my dependency on tools that could help provide an interpretation in the absence of further detail about organisational context. Thus COVID-19, by forcing me to do assessments via Zoom, challenged me once again with some of the ethical questions I had faced in the past.

Ethical implications

The element of judgement in the talent assessment process involves deciding whether individuals should be included in the highly coveted group identified as 'talent'. Such inclusion identifies these individuals as having a greater value to the organisation than others who are excluded. This binary division has complex ethical implications, as highlighted by Sheehan and Anderson (2015: 352), who express concern that the relatively new practice of talent management 'goes further than the HRM [human resource management] discourse of the late 20th century and early 21st century in its conceptual polarization between the "haves" and the "have nots"'. As they point out, this is problematic because executives with the power to identify talent tend to represent dominant groups, so their choices could hinder diversity in the workplace by reinforcing bias around gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, disability, sexual orientation, and religion. After all, people notoriously tend to recruit and promote those whom they perceive to be similar to them.

A close examination of how my own values and ideology concerning organisations might be reflected in my own practice is clearly beyond the scope of this research; but I cannot fail to notice how much talent management tends to be driven by politics and power relations disguised as pseudoscience. In 25 years of practice in Israel, I have yet to see an executive from an ethnic minority appointed to the talent group.

The talent management process can perpetuate unfair advantages in many ways – not just at initial selection, but also through subsequent investment. An organisation that invests heavily in 'high performers' to secure their long-term commitment can be exacerbating inequalities, especially in a resource-constrained environment.

Conclusion

For talent management consultants, understanding human interaction as complex responsive processes offers an opportunity to adopt a more empowering strategy. Rather than habitually following rigid schemes, we can let go of preconceived ideas and allow ourselves to be flexible, improvise, participate in the political game, and draw upon our experiences to inform our unique practical judgement, which can only be gained through action and interaction.

The perspective of complex responsive processes emphasises the importance of spontaneous co-creation of meaning (Stacey, 2012). This has shifted my understanding of assessment, retention, and selection processes away from being absolute processes where consequences can be controlled to being an ongoing process in which time is not independent of action, and interactions occur between interdependent individuals (Mowles, 2011; Stacey, 2012). Any notion of future projections must be construed by harnessing shared history and context in a collaborative effort. Translated into organisational talent management practices, this means jointly reflecting on interactions that emerge in interviews while being aware of the present context and past history, as far back as the history may go, to uncover what could be important in reframing expectations of the future.

I have often experienced that the unpredictability of the interaction is precisely where meaning is created and new ideas or directions can emerge

(Stacey, 2011). There are many situations where I had to set aside my assessment results to respond to a political context, reinterpret the past, or improvise based on an interaction that had emerged during the assessment process. Rather than being frustrated by such episodes and seeking greater control, I now welcome uncertainty, knowing that novelty and meaning often take us by surprise when we least expect it.

I used to worry a great deal about the ethical implications of being expected to predict the future when, of course, I can do no such thing. This is even more complex when the assessment process is virtual, when the interaction is via Zoom. One internal conflict was the responsibility involved in making recommendations that could ruin someone's career. Another was my awareness that a CEO hiring my services would expect (and was paying for) a decisive conclusion; how could I admit any doubts? It is liberating to engage with the idea that such judgements are a social process, understanding my participation in such assessments as both detached and involved at the same time. This fresh perspective provides a much-needed balance between the structure of 'objective' tools and the unpredictability of 'subjective' responses, enabling me to participate fully in co-creating meaning as it emerges in the moment. Recognising truth as an ongoing social construct is a far more rigorous understanding of objectivity than traditional attempts to stifle or overlook subjective input.

Through experience, I have found a way of achieving a balance in which I feel that I am doing a professional job, but at the same time without compromising my ethics. I still use the tools, but rely on them less, knowing that they can only capture a fraction of the bigger picture. I see the assessment as an ongoing conversation – a game played out among the participants – in which I am no longer afraid to reflect or respond naturally. Using this approach, I feel empowered to facilitate without an agenda, and can finally live in peace with the ethical issues related to my practice.

I hope this chapter will contribute towards a more inclusive view of talent management as a social process co-created by everyone involved. I would urge anyone conducting assessments that carry high-risk implications for the key players – evaluating people for inclusion/exclusion in 'talent/high potential' groups, leadership programmes, or excellence forums – to consider this novel approach, which I hope will help us all to participate with greater authenticity, flexibility, and integrity.

Note

1   This chapter presents work that was first explored in the author's 2017 doctoral thesis entitled 'Practising Talent Management: Processes of Judgement, Inclusion and Exclusion' available at https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/handle/2299/19621

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10

A DIALOGUE WITH SEWIT HAILESELASSIE TADESSE

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP

Sewit Haileselassie Tadesse, with the editors

EC: Could you tell us about your experience and how that has shaped your understanding and practice of leadership?

I'm a 32-year-old Ethiopian woman. I have been volunteering since I was 16 years old and ever since, I've been thrust into leadership positions. So, I've practiced leadership, but I've also had a chance to study leadership as I engaged professionally. It has been interesting to compare working with young people and women, specifically in leadership development. I've also been president of boards and have experience of working in what I sometimes reflect to be a very postcolonial development space. This has been a contrast, because when you are residing in aid-recipient countries working in development organizations, the fact that you are local staff, and can be seen as "inexperienced", makes it unlikely that you will be in key decision-making positions.

EC: What kind of training or disciplinary background do you have? What did you study and what have you really been influenced by?

Yes, the disclaimer is that I'm an avid reader and I have a wide variety of interests, but my training is in economics. I was forbidden from studying politics because it was a very tumultuous time in our history. I'm very blunt and outspoken so my parents were scared that I was going to get arrested or die before I graduated. So, I chose economics, which did not agree with me. It was too confining as a theoretical framework, taught by very smart people but very orthodox and hierarchical in their thinking. I wanted to understand more about oppression, about why certain things don't work as they should, or as they are reported to be on paper. I like to think that orthodox economic thought has not influenced me at all!

I also have a degree in gender studies which has influenced me a great deal and shaped my feminist thinking. I chose gender studies because it is the inequality that is most personal and closest to home. Now I am expanding my thinking again back into politics, peace, security, inequalities. I've done research in peacebuilding, currently work in peacebuilding and have taken short courses on leadership. But mainly I'm doing it through practice and not necessarily through study. I'm working in that space right now.

> *EC*: Bearing in mind that hierarchies in Ethiopia are strongly gendered, and women are expected to be meek, how is it that you had the capacity to speak out and speak back from a young age?

I think it's partly my upbringing; I grew up in an egalitarian household. My father believed in equality and I was also lucky enough to be educated among people who enabled that outspokenness in high school. Then I started looking for people that are in my "tribe" – people I am aligned with in my worldview. If I couldn't find them in university, I would go volunteer and find them there and that enriched me and I got into a lot of books I really shouldn't have been reading from a very young age.

So, all of that shaped me, but I believe that I didn't rebel against gender norms as much as I should have in the sense that I use it strategically. I'm more subversive about this because people don't expect it from me. I'm in traditional roles in theory since I'm married and have kids, so partly I'm fulfilling my gender norms, but then I open my mouth and then not so much anymore.

> *KC*: How do those experiences that you just described inform your ideas about leadership, yourself as a leader and others as leaders?

I'm very critical of hierarchies: I don't like them; I don't believe in them; I push back against them on a regular basis. I realize that single-handedly saving an organization or a project is impossible; that's not how the world works. Leadership is about letting the team you have work for you and if they do it happily and willingly, and if they take ownership, then that makes your own work easier too. And I think that works in life, in organizations and in small groups of volunteers.

If people are happy to be there and they buy into the vision, then it's easier to have them work for you. I am deeply uncomfortable with the idea of a leader being on top, dictating to people or talking down to them and giving orders, because it does not work as people then do their jobs out of fear and not necessarily out of ownership. You would have to have some sort of perverse satisfaction from controlling people to be comfortable in that kind of leadership role. I don't like being spoken to and being treated like that as someone who is part of a team just as I don't enjoy doing that to others because I believe in agency. I think people are at their best when they are at their happiest, and they're at their happiest when they don't feel controlled or confined.

> *KC*: Have you got an example of what you're talking about that you could describe for us?

In 2019, after serving two years on the board of an organization working on developing leadership amongst groups who tend not to have a voice, I came to a position of leadership. I had the experience of working with people with various leadership styles in that organization. One of my colleagues was someone who had a drastically different approach from mine, preferring a controlling, top-down and old-fashioned approach to leadership, very different from the collaborative approach I preferred. This created a considerable conflict about how to develop a team. Associations in Ethiopia depend on membership fees and it is only if members feel ownership that they keep paying fees and using the services. If there is no sense of ownership, you know it is a one-time relationship, and not a sustainable one, whereby people leave once they have taken what they need. I wanted to change that, but it undermined the entrenched understanding of authority within the organizational culture. My value of wanting to share authority and responsibility was understood as a lack of confidence in doing the

job and taking a public-facing role. It was a very educational experience, understanding how deeply internalized age-based hierarchies affect leadership as well as how routinely we replicate patriarchal norms of leadership, which I see as inconsistent with developing leadership in these groups.

> *EC*: In your anti-authoritarian style of leadership, what practical things are involved in trying to develop a more collective sense of ownership?

My understanding of ownership is that it's not a triangular or linear kind of decision-making process; it's circular where you have collaboration among different teams implementing one project or activity. As the program owner I am perceived to have more ownership than team members that are there to support the process. If your team is used to a model of leadership where the manager gives orders and they implement what is supposed to be implemented, then there is no collaboration. So, what happens in practice is that you spend a lot of time doing coordination work instead of thinking strategically; you do a lot of explaining, linking people, telling them who to talk to, how to do things instead of spending more time building relationships as someone who is in charge of producing ideas. And you're stuck doing administrative work that would be done by others if they had more of a sense of ownership of their tasks.

Here's the folly of the traditional leadership structure. The good part is everybody gives you all the credit: you know your picture is there, you're called out by name, and you're celebrated, but your team is never acknowledged. So, if your team is never acknowledged and does not take ownership and responsibility for actions – whether good or bad – then you are held accountable for each minuscule minor task, including where to buy toilet paper! So, my understanding of ownership is that each team member understands the main vision and works toward it from whichever angle that they're contributing from. Each is acknowledged and celebrated for the success and is held accountable for any failures. That's how teams in my mind should work. If the leader can give up some credit along the way, so be it. People should lead from behind the curtains and not necessarily be up front.

> *KC*: I would like to work in a team like that but have yet to work in one and I wonder if you have.

I did manage in my previous experience with the leadership organization. But here's the pitfall of that approach: I was leading behind the scenes, but somebody else was taking the credit. We managed it because the team let somebody else take the credit but it didn't last.

It reminds me of a training program I attended in Switzerland. One leadership instructor gave us all the different theories of leadership – authoritarian, liberal or *laissez-faire* – and all the types in between. He asked, "what kind of leader should you be?" So, people were saying, "I should be this one" or "I should be that one". Then he said, "do you think the kind of leadership style that you've chosen is going to be the same in case of a fire compared to if you have a two-year implementation period?" If you have a two-year implementation period for something, you have time to be democratic. But if there is a fire, what you need is an authoritarian to tell people, "that's the exit. This is how we're going to get out."

> *KC*: So, you're talking about the importance of context? You talked about having to defer to your older colleague because one of the contextual factors is respect for elders and a patriarchal society where age and status are related. So, I'm wondering if there are other factors like that that come to mind when you're thinking about what influences the choices you make about how you take up leadership or how you see others taking up leadership?

I'm still learning because I don't always read the context very well; I get into conflicts. Sometimes I forget I'm a woman and how that's perceived in a specific context. I forget I'm Black often – not in a sense that I forget my identity – but I forget how it influences, for example, the development space so I get into plenty of *faux pas* when that happens. Ideally, I should be able to read the situation better and use it to my advantage. But it's not something that I have perfected.

> *EC*: Can you tell us more about navigating the development space and people reading you or misreading you? Can you tell us any stories about that?

The developmental space is highly colonial. I don't believe hierarchy is necessary most of the time but there are certain implicit hierarchies within the development space between expatriates and local staff, within the

hierarchies of the organization or the project, and I usually don't adhere to those hierarchies.

Sometimes you have no choice. In my first internship after I finished my university degree, I became close friends with an American. She was getting paid US$1500 and I was getting paid 1500 Birr (approximately US$33 at the time). Even when I discovered this, we remained best friends because it was not her fault how much she got paid; it's the system that was entirely unfair. My local Ethiopian colleagues would come to me and say, "Why do you spend time with her? Why aren't you bringing lunch? Why are you going to lunch with the expat staff?" But for me it had nothing to do with the work hierarchies, it was just relationships that I was building based on who I felt I could learn from or who I felt I would like, and it didn't matter who they were. It offended the local staff as I transgressed the social segregation between local and expatriate. I spoke my mind. I talked to the director freely and was friendly, and my local supervisor did not feel comfortable with that at all. There are still hierarchies that I trespass upon occasionally. Sometimes it still gets me into trouble.

> *EC*: You are painting a more complex picture than the simple crude versions of "development is neocolonial", which tend to assume that all the work of perpetuating that is done by the expatriates. What I hear you saying is that everybody gets involved with perpetuating these kinds of relationships?

Inequality is reinforced by everyone that takes part. There are gatekeepers within the local community, there are gatekeepers within the expat community and there are some instances where those two groups don't mix at all. They don't share meals, they don't have coffee and they barely converse because of language barriers, and that's the norm. Local and expatriate staff stay apart partly because they are paid different amounts. They have different vacations or rest and relaxation time. At work, they have different roles: often the expatriate staff run the programs while the local staff run the operational and administrative side. Perhaps they are influenced by the already established expat community – many don't get to know the culture or the local people; they come to do a job and they end up socializing in completely different circles than their colleagues. So, if you don't socialize then you don't have relationships and if you don't have relationships then you have those segregations.

> *KC*: This makes me wonder what other purposes keeping people sep-arate serves? That doesn't necessarily need an answer, but it's making me think about how communities protect themselves from each other and threats to identity.

Sometimes the segregation is a result of competency, because – let's face it – there are better educational systems in the Global North than there are in the Global South, and most likely your colleagues will be less educated or better educated than you. And it's reflected in your competence; how you perceive things, how you articulate things. They're also lines that are drawn because of those differences.

> *KC*: When you speak out about the things that you believe in, I was wondering how much of that you do in a planned way and how much of it is just you finding yourself doing it. And what impact does that have on new relationships?

I choose my battles in the professional space and I'm very deliberate. But within my personal space, that becomes very hard. As a woman facing all the cultural norms that restrict women's leadership, then you have to play specific kinds of games or get into a lot of conflict depending on what you have the energy for.

> *KC*: So are you weighing up something that you're trying to achieve versus the risks of doing what you want?

The risk is between what you want to achieve and your personal well-being. If you're looking at how to bring about transformation, then the demands on the leader's thought processes are arduous. You have to be very delib-erate about the who, the what, the when, and the how. Because the timing might be wrong, the context might be wrong, or the person delivering the reform might be off.

The high expectations we have of leaders and the disdain we feel toward them when they fail to deliver on those expectations can be discerned all around us.

> *EC*: What about the role of research in leadership? Do you think it's an important part of taking good decisions, and making good relationships with people, and thus helps understanding?

I think understanding the context you're operating in is vital. Understanding the people that you're working with is important, as is knowing them, and where the triggers are. If you know what is happening in their life you can think about how it might affect their work. We were asked, for example, to do a contextual analysis of the Ethiopian political space. It was an emotional week for us local staff, as the country was facing huge challenges, and maybe the international staff did not entirely understand the emotional complexity of this. So, I think the context really matters and you need to be aware of it.

Reflection really matters as a leader. You need to keep reflecting on what's happening, why you're acting the way you do, why others are acting the way they do. It is a very human process. You don't turn off who you are when you go into the workplace – you bring all of it with you. So, research in the conventional sense is useful, but so is an awareness of the self, others, and the context, and how they relate to each other.

> *EC*: So perhaps a failure to think about the situation of others, which is part of research, is a kind of abuse of power. I've seen senior expatriates who don't really understand what's going on get away with ignoring important issues because of their position of power. So, perhaps part of navigating leadership well is not taking advantage of the powerful position you have by closing down the need for research?

Exactly! You often see in development projects that it is inconvenient to do the in-depth work during a preliminary assessment, so they don't do it – completely ignoring historical dynamics, gender dynamics, vital relationships in the social fabric. Even when they're implementing projects, they fail to do the research because it is inconvenient or just there's a certain timeline for the funding. Other pressures intervene that are more important to them than actually getting the job right. You see it in diplomacy and in journalism.

> *EC*: When we were running the Deepening Democracy Programme at SOAS[1] we relied on your leadership within a cohort of scholars we were working with and I needed you to explain to me the complex political environment we were working in.

It affects team dynamics. It affects how effective your processes are, and if you don't understand, then you can't do the work. There is a common

practice of appeasing the *ferangis* (meaning foreigners, usually White) in Ethiopia. People will tell you what you want to hear, including *chegger yellem* (no problem). It affects how effectively you can carry out whatever it is that you're trying to do, as you assume you will not face challenges, but then you find there are plenty of problems. This operates at different levels of the social hierarchy, whether it is with expats, the diaspora community or people in the upper class, or women versus men: you are excluded from acquiring details in the information that you need in order to operate effectively within the context because you are foreign or you are a woman or you are outside of a certain clique.

> *KC*: I'm thinking back over our conversation so far. If you were working with leaders, advising them on what they need to pay attention to, what kind of things would you be telling them?

I don't tell them anything other than to try. I think the "leaders can be made" theory to me is difficult because you can't learn it in a classroom. It is practice based. So, I think providing opportunities, and teaching others how to seize opportunities for leadership, that is the goal that I work on. I used to give public speaking training to women for a couple of years and it wasn't necessarily about giving them pointers and tools about how to speak in front of others. It was about getting into why they don't speak up. And what is it in the context that doesn't enable that leadership development? For example, a very experienced older woman told me that she doesn't speak up because she just assumes that everyone else knows better than she does. That's one of the areas that the conversation always goes into.

A final point I would make is not to buy into the individualistic approach where you are the sole responsible individual to change the world. I would advise people who want to practice leadership, or want to understand leadership, to start by working on the self and working on relationships and understanding others. Understanding how organizations work before aspiring to a leadership position makes good sense. The traditional model of leadership has a lot of pitfalls. It's good for the ego, but it's not necessarily effective, nor is it the best route for the individual that is practicing it.

Note

1 The Global Research Network on Parliaments and People has two programs that have relied on Haileselassie's advice: Deepening Democracy Programme funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council and Global Challenges Research Fund, and the Global Comparative Ethnography on Parliaments, Politicians and People funded by the European Research Council.

11

FINAL NOTES ON THE PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

Emma Crewe and Kiran Chauhan

Looking back over the chapters and making further sense of the inter-twining threads that our authors have presented could be seen as an act of leadership, whether adequate or inadequate. If we represent our authors' narratives, reflections and analyses of their experiences of leadership in ways that resonate with them but also with our readers, then we are doing our job well as editing leaders. If no one recognises themselves in our final comments, either because we obsess about uninteresting details, evade the most telling points because we get distracted or fail to articulate ourselves clearly, then we are failing. So, editing a book can involve leadership – like in any group activity where there is difference, people have different roles and ideas, and decisions have to be made.

Nearly all our main chapter authors are graduates of the University of Hertfordshire's Doctor of Management (DMan) programme, and so take the perspective of human interaction as complex responsive processes seriously. This entails taking a critical approach to seeing organisations as merely individuals or systems; avoiding simplistic typologies, judgements

and binaries; and focusing on how people's interdependencies in organisations are enabled and constrained by culture, power and difference (Mowles, 2015). The strongest intellectual influences are the complexity sciences, process sociology/anthropology, group analytical psychotherapy and pragmatist philosophy and those teaching on the DMan are all dazzled by Norbert Elias, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Hannah Arendt and Pierre Bourdieu. The process of doing a doctorate on the DMan is highly collaborative; in line with our normal highly collaborative tradition, we had several discussions with the authors about the book and commented several times on drafts.

We have also included dialogues with colleagues who have never encountered the programme, partly to bring even more difference into the book. The DMan graduate authors are three women and four men, from various countries (Denmark, Israel, the UK and the US), and various sectors (private, public, civil society). But they are all White and few have experience of working outside the Global North. So, we invited contributions from Adam Habib and Sewit Haileselassie Tadesse, from South Africa and Ethiopia respectively, as two highly experienced leaders. We did not ask them to write chapters in a format familiar to anyone who has a doctorate on the DMan with its specific mix of narrative and reflexive analysis, but chose an approach that was collaborative in a different way. We recorded dialogues, inspired in part by the Bourdieu and Waquant transcripts of interviews (1992), in an online interview and then iterated the editing of the text with them until they were satisfied with the result.

Since neither the DMan graduate authors, nor Habib or Haileselassie, are offering easy solutions or prescriptions for leaders, what then are they offering their readers?

A richer account of leading

The contributors to this book are all providing a different way of conceiving of leadership. If you think, and therefore feel, differently about what leading means, your action will likely vary from the norm too. Of course, thinking is a form of action and action is impossible without thinking. And change does not come about in a deterministic way (e.g., change your ideas and then the organisation will change) because ideas do not drive action, or not exclusively, and they are as important as a way of rationalising it. So, if

you are looking for sound-biteable tips for improving leadership you may be disappointed by this book. But we are offering a critique of mainstream approaches, and an exploration of what happens if you go off-piste, so that even if you will not be able to increase your predictive powers, you might get ideas about how to be more leadership savvy.

Each chapter points to some or other aspect of the idealisations of leadership that our authors have found dominating conversations in their workplaces. These idealisations sometimes position leaders as if they were able to sit outside the groups they work with or to move people towards the goals they have already decided on. This may be achieved through ideas about special abilities they alone possess, or undergoing stepwise processes that can be easily described in the innumerable books or webinars about leadership. Leaders are asked to pursue harmony and simplification, to make plans, to be objective, to measure with standardised key performance indicators and to implement abstract theories irrespective of the specific contexts in which they find themselves. On this account, leaders are autonomous and able to make choices freely. Conflict and difference are overcome by developing a common vision and inspiring everyone to follow. Likewise, their skills or capabilities are measurable by objective assessors, their futures are predictable and they can be developed reliably to be more effective.

The narratives recounted in the chapters point to how these idealisations, taken on their own, would provide an impoverished account of what people are doing together in organisations. Our authors find that leaders feel their interdependence with others acutely as constraints on their capacities to act, as conflict within themselves and with others, and as not living up to the ideals expected of them. They find leaders fully enmeshed in the messiness of interplaying histories, intentions and ideologies, and the politics of hyperlocal contexts that are unamenable to the application of prescriptions and tools. This is because hyperlocal contexts are unknowable, unpredictable and unplannable, so rather than knowing what we are doing, leaders are finding out what they are doing as they improvise into emerging futures based on practical judgements. Rather than overcoming conflict, leaders who acknowledge difference and encourage groups to challenge inequality, may find ways to work with conflict that don't descend into avoidance, abuse or even violence.

But why should it be that the mainstream accounts of leadership differ so wildly from the experiences that our authors recount? It would be too easy

to think of the accounts of the messiness of organisational life and lead-ership as being more 'real' compared to the perspectives being critiqued, and to idealise doing away with the rhetoric in favour of this reality. More interesting, however, is to see both as aspects of the plurality of experience in which leadership emerges as a theme. This leads to the question of why such different perspectives about leadership might co-exist. One explan-ation for the tension our authors notice is that simplifications, and ideals of harmony or predictability, are habitual: if 'leader' is the term that has been used to describe those who, for much of human history, have made and implemented plans (or provided an illusion of doing so), then perhaps it is no wonder that we are seeing a proliferation of inflated promises, man-agerialist assumptions that relate cause and effect in a linear way, and the fetishization of the trappings of power and authority.

Another explanation is that mainstream ideas of leadership provide com-fort and reassurance, soothing anxieties associated with uncertainty that would be unbearable if they had to be confronted head-on. How would we feel, for example, if those in positions of leadership all at once admitted they had no idea what they were doing, and moreover, couldn't know? In some ways, this was for many the experience at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic; if the praise and opprobrium heaped on global leaders who had to act so visibly in an unprecedented global crisis is anything to go by, then it's probably fair to say we may not have been too tolerant of prevarication and delay. We wanted leaders to be doing something, to look like they had a plan, perhaps knowing full well that it was impossible to know what would happen next in the course of the pandemic. More generally, as we become increasingly aware of the new complexities brought about by being ever more globally interconnected, for example, in terms of communication or the use of the planet's natural resources, the need for this collective belief that someone, somewhere has a plan starts to make sense.

A more critical view might lead us to say that maintaining this tension is just one of the ways that the balance of power in capitalist societies is maintained in favour of those who are already better served. By promoting the neo-liberalist ideals of autonomy and freedom from constraint, argu-ably, those who benefit from the status quo can deny the responsibilities that become apparent when taking a more interdependent perspective on human relating. The latter would mean acknowledging the parts we all play in contributing to global phenomena such as climate change, inequality in

access to the COVID-19 vaccines, displacement and socio-political inequalities based on gender, race, age, sexuality, disability, class or caste. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai points out that our attitudes to inequality and poverty are culturally embedded, whether we are in positions of authority or not (2004). Those individuals facing poverty, racism or unequal life chances are blamed by some for their victimhood. Others take the political view that inequality is structural so change has to be at the level of the system – or in the language of complex responsive processes, myriad new actions are needed from which new population-wide patterns may start to emerge.

But Appadurai's point is that if you see political economy and culture as entangled, then how you think influences inequality. The relatively wealthy are not just the product of either exploitation or hard work; they have a more fully developed capacity to aspire. They have better networks, more experience of the links between material goods, opportunities and options, and skills at knowing how to make use of these. Those in positions of leadership also tend to have a strong capacity to aspire. But the extent to which aspiration is individually or collectively focused is largely up to them. The choices we are prepared to make in response to these acknowledgements would be the real test of our commitment to our espoused values.

An invitation to research and an ethical challenge

When social life is understood as essentially unpredictable, the question about what leaders *should* do becomes increasingly problematic. This is because any such statement would need to be understood as reflecting some or other ideological position, which if we take a practice perspective seriously, itself can only be socially contingent. Almost all our authors conclude their chapters by suggesting that engaging more deeply with experiences of plurality, contradiction, paradox and unpredictability in which leadership emerges as a theme, is likely to provide greater capacity for action.

Some go further in suggesting that worthwhile activities for leaders may therefore include making time to reflect on ambiguity, ambivalence and consternation, bringing more of the rules of local games into view, and seeing resistance, conflict and discomfort, including in oneself, as unavoidable aspects of the politics of interdependence. In other words, our authors could be seen to be advocating for research to play a greater part in leadership. A good process

of inquiry requires (a) multi-disciplinarity – a sense of history, geography, politics, cultural difference, psychology; (b) attention to plural views, interests and sensibilities as everyone's experience of work is inevitably so diverse and unequal; (c) reflexivity to take account of how one's own assumptions and habitus (in Bourdieu's sense) are impacting on one's own inquiry and on possibilities for the future (Crewe, 2021: 11–16).

Reflexivity sounds rather obscure but there are versions that are closely related and shed light on what is needed. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, Shotter and Tsoukas (2014: 232) describe deliberate thinking as a mental as well as bodily process:

> through deliberate thinking we can become aware of (a) the broader context within which deliberate thinking occurs, and (b) the particularity of the situation facing us, through 'wandering around' within the situation, testing possible ways in which to describe it in words, while sensing how it 'talks back' to us.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes about how something similar – deliberative imagination – is essential for developing empathy to overcome the pervasive pattern of dehumanising groups of people. To be a moral leader, imagination is an integral part of anticipating what any action might mean for others. It is worth repeating (from Chapter 1), because it is so revealing, that Mead (1934: 256) writes that leadership arises when someone is able to: 'take in more than others of an act in process, who can put himself into relation with whole groups in the community whose attitudes have not entered into the lives of the others in the community. He becomes a leader.'[1] So, leadership arises when someone uses their imagination to understand what relational moment they are in, have come from and might be going towards.

Carrithers (2005) has written about this kind of imaginative leadership in action. When Willy Brandt, the then German Chancellor, visited Warsaw in 1970 to commemorate the Holocaust, he had to lay a wreath. Such international occasions are regulated by strict diplomatic protocols so that when it came to the moment he should place the wreath on the monument, in front of a huge crowd of guards and dignitaries, it was obvious what he should do: put the wreath down, bow his head and then leave the monument. But, as he explained in his memoirs, he improvised: 'As I stood

on the edge of Germany's historical abyss, feeling the burden of millions of murders, I did what people do when words fail' (as quoted by Crewe, 2021: 128). He fell to his knees in an expression of spontaneous remorse and repentance, on behalf of Germany, and arguably, the country was never the same again. Until then Germany had avoided discussion of its role in the Holocaust but this act of disruption, this change of rhythm, made it more possible for the country to acknowledge the past and teach about it in schools. This is part of the reason that Brandt was given the Nobel Prize for peace. Greta Thunberg, the climate change activist, seemed to achieve a similar act of leadership when she refused to go to school, sat outside the Swedish Parliament and inspired millions to join school strikes for climate justice in 2019.

Implicit to these suggestions is the assumption that by coming to a richer awareness of our experience, we can more confidently weigh competing goods against each other in making decisions, accepting that what will actually happen as a result of those decisions remains unknowable. This draws on the pragmatist understanding of ethics whereby situations call out unique combinations of competing values to be resolved through action. For Mead, for example, ethical action means taking in the widest range of interests, including one's own and coming to a view on what will be most helpful in resolving the situation (1934: 388). That our authors land on greater choice and freedom is perhaps not surprising given that that the complex responsive processes canon draws on a key ideological tenet of the critical management studies tradition: that of freedom from domination. The position is more nuanced however, as our authors are suggesting also that freedom to act emerges in the acknowledgement of the inevitability of social constraint rather than as an escape from it.

Mead wrote that leaders change, enlarge and enrich their communities. The most influential religious leaders – Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha – did this by appealing to their communities about cosmological relationships in ways that are distinctive to that group (old ideas) but relevant to the future (new substance), so being persuasive for both existing and potential new members (respectively: 'love your neighbour', 'justice will come to all if we submit to the will of the one god', 'reach enlightenment'). Those leaders stand out as symbolic, 'representative of the community as it might exist if it were fully developed along the lines that they had started. New conceptions have brought with them, through great individuals, attitudes

which enormously enlarge the environment within which these individuals live' (Mead, 1934: 217).

The conclusions our authors have reached are those that feel meaningful to them based on the problems they encountered, and which have helped them to deepen their own practice as leaders or in developing leaders. They are written as invitations to enlarge the community that is interested in understanding leadership differently, acknowledging (sometimes even relishing) the contradictions, conflicts and uncertainty that being with others involves in favour of the reductive prescriptions that are often on offer. Taken together, we hope this volume will help readers to see more in their own experience and find for themselves and for others, a greater sense of freedom.

Note

1   As in the introduction, we note that Mead's reference to male leaders feels anachronistic in the 21st century; we see his comments as relevant for people of all genders.

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