Relational Leadership meets Leadership Development

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This paper explores the implications of recent constructionist theories of leadership for leadership development. In particular it explains and documents a recent attempt to develop an executive MBA leadership program informed by relational leadership theory and leadership-as-practice perspectives. The paper moves through three phases: a review of constructionist theories of leadership; implications for the practice of leadership; and, an account of the leadership development program informed by these theories and understandings of leadership practice.

Given persistent concerns with contemporary business leadership practices (Salaman 2011) and questions over the value of much leadership development undertaken by business schools and other providers (Starkey et al 2004), it is appropriate to systematically consider the potential for recent critical work in leadership studies to contribute to the development of better leadership development programs. Much recent academic work has focussed on the development of new approaches to understanding leadership, often based on decentring leadership and shifting the emphasis away from the traits, behaviours and competencies of the leader, problematizing the capacity of leadership to be rational and universal and disrupting the notion that leadership can be reduced to a series of idealised competencies in favour of examining what leadership practice actually involves and how leadership emerges and operates. Can this significant body of work inform leadership development? What might a leadership development program informed by these ideas look like?
Constructionist theories of leadership

In their recent ‘mapping of the terrain’ of leadership studies Ospina and Uhl-Bien (2012) contrast modernist, ‘entity perspectives’ with postmodernist ‘constructionist perspectives’. Approaches associated with the former tend to privilege the individual, especially the individual leader as the principal agent doing leadership, and, ontologically, see reality as something ‘out there’ capable of discovery. Constructionist approaches privilege collective dimensions and see leadership and its practice as social constructed, emergent and fluid; realities, including what makes for effective leadership, are socially constructed and contextualised rather than fixed and universal.

In similar vein, Denis, Langley and Sergi (2012) have reviewed current theories which seek to move ‘beyond the “heroic” or “romantic” view of unitary leadership’; what they term ‘leadership in the plural’. They identify four streams of ‘leadership in the plural’ research: ‘sharing leadership for team effectiveness’ which focuses on mutual leadership in the context of groups; ‘pooling leadership capacities at the top to direct others’ which aligns with notions of collective leadership, often in the context of top management teams; ‘spreading leadership within and across levels over time’ which is associated with notions of distributed leadership; and, ‘producing leadership through interaction’ which most thoroughly de-centres leadership and sees it as a quality of organizing and relations, rather than as a quality of individuals. This fourth stream, which is of most interest here, is often referred to as ‘relational leadership’. Denis, et al, argue that the common theme of all the research in this ‘producing
leadership through interaction’ stream is the decentring of the individual leader and the assertion that ‘leadership is fundamentally more about participation and collectively creating a sense of direction than it is about control and exercising authority’ (2012: 44).

Relational Leadership Theory has been defined as ‘an overarching framework for the study of leadership as a social influence process through which emergent coordination (e.g., evolving social order) and change (e.g., new approaches, values, attitudes, behaviours, ideologies) are constructed and produced’ (Uhl-Bien 2006). From this perspective leadership and its practice is socially constructed through relational (social) processes –

the influential acts of organizing that contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships. In these processes, interdependencies are organized in ways which, to a greater or lesser degree, promote the values and interests of the social order; definitions of social order are negotiated, found acceptable, implemented and renegotiated (Uhl-Bien 2006: 662)

The primary focus, therefore, is on the study of social processes in which leadership is constituted, rather than on leader actions and behaviours. These processes are open, contested and negotiated, and what counts for leadership is constantly being re-made. These social processes are ‘relational’ in the sense that they concern the processes of ‘being in relation to others and the larger social system’ (Uhl-Bien 2006: 664). Rather than focussing merely on the way that a leader might relate to his/her followers, the
focus is on how organisational members, as participants, interactively define and negotiate leadership as a process of organizing. A number of things flow from this: leadership becomes a quality or phenomenon of organizations (or organizing) rather than of individuals; leadership is studied ‘wherever it occurs’ rather than simply being what ‘leaders’ do; and, leadership is contextualised, and is critically shaped, by the local-cultural-historical processes that characterise its organisational context.

Another related constructionist approach can also be usefully invoked at this point: leadership-as-practice (Raelin 2007; Carroll, Levy and Richmond 2008; Raelin 2011). A leadership-as-practice approach can complement relational leadership theory, as it is ‘explicitly constructionist’, ‘inherently relational and collective’, focuses on ‘discourse, narrative and rhetoric’, understands leadership to be ‘situated and socially defined’ and ‘privileges lived or day-to-day experience’ (Carroll, Levy and Richmond 2008: 366). Leadership as practice draws attention to the ways that organisational actors get on with the work of leadership, highlighting the ‘nitty gritty details’ (Chia 2004) of routine and practice. Moreover, leadership practice is understood as fundamentally relational and social, and enacted in the context of specific institutional and organisational settings (praxis), by a wide range of organisational actors (practitioners).

**Implications for the practice of leadership**

Taking constructionist approaches to leadership theory seriously implies the need to re-think what we mean by ‘leadership’. The idea that leadership is what leaders do when exercising formal authority and influence, setting strategy, allocating resources,
making decisions, articulating their vision, and so forth, is certainly displaced in favour of attention to social relational processes and practices. But when do these practices count as leadership? Some such as Fairhurst (2007) suggest that leadership is discursively constituted: leadership is that which is constituted by, for example, organisational discourses as being ‘leadership’. Uhl-Bien is less avowedly constructionist on this point: processes are leadership when they generate social influence that contributes to order and change.

The idea that leadership is a discursive accomplishment is certainly appealing: whether or not one accepts that leadership is discursively constituted, or constituted by reference to its ordering and organising effects as implied by Uhl-Bien (2006: 667), from a constructionist perspective, leadership, leading, ordering and organising are all socially constructed and enacted through communication, or perhaps more accurately, through discourse. The idea here is that ensembles of practitioners in organisational settings co-create, disseminate, and continually re-define various organisational discourses which serve to lead the organisation and its members (more, or less, effectively). These discourses serve to prioritise certain things, encourage particular behaviours, elevate and foreground specific threats and opportunities, advocate different courses of action, etc. These discourses are not, of course, purely or simply authored by ‘leaders’; they are social processes involving many practitioners; they are also not just communicative (made up of speech acts and texts) but also constituted through action, routine and practice; and they are not fixed, but are emergent, being constantly re-made and re-produced; finally they are also not universal (although organisational discourses will inevitably draw on mega-discourses
of leadership, such as ‘transformational leadership’) but are organisationally and institutionally contextualised.

Thinking of leadership as a discursive process leads to a consideration of leadership as sensemaking (Weick 1995; Pye 2005). In organisational and business contexts that are often characterised by ambiguity, volatility, uncertainty and complexity seeing leadership as the social process of making sense of a situation, predicament or environment appears more compelling than the image of leading as an individual leader making rational calculations, developing strategies and executing them.

Others from a relational leadership orientation have attempted to specify what the practice of leadership, understood from a relational perspective, actually involves. Lichtenstein and Plowman (2009) have argued that there are certain sets of behaviours which are consistent with the encouragement of relational leadership: disrupting existing patterns, encouraging novelty and sensemaking, sense-giving activities and stabilizing feedbacks. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) suggest that the practice of relational leadership is about a ‘way of being-in-the-world’ and they reference practical wisdom, intersubjectivity and dialog. From these perspectives a number of themes recur: the importance of sensemaking as a collective enterprise, encouraging and cultivating learning and reflection (both self-reflection and in groups), open communication and a capacity to generate and accommodate change.

Some contributors in this stream have been quite explicit in identifying the democratic ideology which they see as central to relational leadership. Raelin (2011) argues that leadership-as-practice perspectives need to be complemented by a
‘leaderful practice’ orientation which he sees as ‘unrepentant in advocating distinctively democratic values’ (2011: 204). Fletcher argues that post-heroic leadership is defined by its shared and distributed qualities, its understanding of leadership as a social process, and its outcomes: ‘mutual learning, greater collective understanding, and ultimately, positive action’ (2004: 649). She contends that doing relational leadership, or in her terms, ‘post-heroic leadership’ requires a particular kind of competence:

Creating a context in which growth-fostering, high-quality connections … and social interactions can occur and mutual learning … can take place, requires relational skills and emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, empathy, vulnerability, and openness to learning from others regardless of their positional authority, and the ability to work within more fluid power dynamics, reenvisioning the very notion of power from “power over” to “power with” (Fletcher 2004: 650).

**Leadership development**

A relatively small body of work has investigated what constructionist approaches such as relational leadership might imply for leadership development and the way that we seek to develop or cultivate more effective leadership. The work of Fletcher for example, points to the need to for the development of ‘relational skills’ and ‘emotional intelligence’. Her work and that of Raelin suggest the need for a style of management and organisational cultures conducive to open communication, learning, democratic participation in decision-making, teamwork and collaboration.
Presumably then leadership development needs to cultivate these management and organisational styles.

In their consideration of the implications of leadership as practice for leadership development, Carroll, Levy and Richmond (2008) advocate moving away from the ‘competency paradigm’ and reject the idea that we should be training against specific leadership competencies which they see as too blunt, generic and universalist, ‘breeding conformity to a standardized and unfocused leadership model’ (2008: 365). In its place they call for a more subtle form of leadership development which is grounded in practice, which engages with organisational experiences and which is ‘experiential, interactive, situated, embodied, sustained and relational’ (2008: 375).

With a similar commitment to practice, Raelin (2011) has argued that we need to move beyond teaching about leadership (Mintzberg 2004), or teaching idealised, reified competencies, for that matter, to learning through practice. Raelin (2007) sees action learning as ideally suited to this ambition, drawing as it does on engagement with the real-world practical problems and experiences encountered by organisational members. Key too, for Raelin, is a new understanding of the role of the ‘teacher’ who needs to be a facilitator of learning. The facilitator’s style is distinctive: encouraging participants to be enquiring and responsible for their learning, modelling behaviours such as tolerance for ambiguity, openness, patience and empathy (2007: 509).

Reflecting on all this work, and its implications, I advocate leadership development that is informed by four key principles: critical thinking, experiential methods, facilitation, and critical reflexive practice. Critical thinking helps problematise
assumptions and holds open to question many of the taken-for-granted beliefs that participants hold. Key here is to question what leadership actually means. Experiential learning methods bring practice to the fore and gets participants learning by doing. Learning experiences can and should include both experiences that participants have had, and are having at work, as well as new or novel experiences that can be introduced as central to leadership development programs. Learning experiences need to be facilitated so that participants can generate as many insights as possible from those experiences. This can be done in many ways, but debriefing and reflecting on experiences in safe and constructive group environments can be especially powerful. This leads to the importance of developing in participants a capacity for, and comfort with, critical reflexive practice, where using insights to change behaviours, and continually and routinely revisiting those lessons and changes, becomes part of one’s practice.

With a colleague, David Grant, I have attempted to apply these principles in a leadership development program – the two-week intensive residential Leadership module in our Global Executive MBA program. The program utilises a multi-practice perspectives framework in which leadership is explored through a series of experiential perspectives: sensemaking and contemporary art practice, the military, politics, philosophy, dramaturgical perspectives, ethics and music. The program is detailed elsewhere (Hall and Grant 2013). For present purposes a number of features are highlighted.

Firstly, the program seeks to introduce leadership as a socially constructed practice rather than as an idealised set of competencies. It does this through a brief overview
of leadership studies which culminates in an exploration of leadership studies and approaches which see leadership as socially constructed. This is facilitated through a series of exercises in which participants encounter and engage with media constructions of leadership. Seeing the different ways in which different leaders are ‘portrayed’ in the media, and interpreting what those images tell us about leadership, sensitises participants to the notion that leadership might be socially constructed.

Secondly, the first practice perspective – sensemaking and contemporary art – aims to be frame-breaking and destabilising for participants. Working in teams of four or five, participants are engaged in an experience which is confounding, ambiguous and apparently nonsensical. Drawing on the art practice movement known as fluxus and using the *Fluxus Workbook* (Friedman et al 2002) teams are given a series of nine scores from the workbook and, equipped with a video camera and a camera technician, are asked to interpret, perform and record the scores in three hours, using the Sydney CBD as their context. The scores are invariably ambiguous, and often surreal. In the subsequent facilitated debrief discussions the experience is framed as an exercise in sensemaking. While lessons derived from the experience vary, it is common for participants to reflect on the collective process of sensemaking, the role of creativity, and the relevance of circumstance, context and chance. Teams are asked to consider what they regarded to be their most successful score and to re-perform that score live later in the day, in a different setting, the Art Gallery of NSW.

Thirdly, the six practice perspectives are introduced through experiences. In each perspective participants work with experienced practitioners from the military, politics, philosophy, performance and storytelling (dramaturgical perspective), ethics
and music. While the experiences within and across each of the practice perspectives differ, they include: presentations from practitioners on their work, their approach to what they do, their experiences and insights; question and answer sessions with practitioners; case studies; team and individual exercises and simulations; hands-on activities where participants practice the techniques commonly used in the relevant field of practice. While these field experiences are typically stimulating and entertaining for participants, how does constructive learning occur through these experiences?

Our experience suggests that learning occurs in at least three ways: through heightened self-awareness, through analogical reasoning (Tsoukas 1993) or ‘bisociation’, and through modelling. Firstly, participants experiencing unfamiliar practices are cast in the unusual role of being novices and are compelled to unlearn old practices, and learn new practices. Amongst other things, this seems to highlight particular strengths and weaknesses and quickly exposes particular preconceptions, assumptions and predilections. To the extent that participants are able to constructively reflect on these experiences and their impact on them, this can lead to greater self-awareness. Secondly, participants, at the start of each perspective are reminded to consider the concepts, techniques and values which are prioritised in the perspective as they experience it. This simple framework is designed to give participants a means for comparing and contrasting the different perspectives and then re-evaluating their own practice in similar terms. Seeing key concepts, techniques and values in an unfamiliar field of practice tends to highlight their specificity and particularity. Participants are then asked to draw analogies between the field of practice they have just experienced, and their own field of business practice: what
have you learnt from practice in this field that might be applicable or not applicable to your own practice? What stands out as distinctive in your own practice that might be, or might not be, amenable to change? Thirdly, participants learn from the modelling behaviour of the practitioners they work with in each perspective – the different ways in which contemporary artists, musicians, army commanders, political advisors, philosophers and ethicists go about their work, interact with each other, evaluate excellence and ascribe value is clearly telling and says much about organisational cultures, learning, orientations to change and what might be seen as productive or dysfunctional behaviours.

Fourthly, it is apparent that maximising the learning potential of the experience of the perspectives requires a diligent and disciplined approach to facilitation by the module leaders. Specifically the facilitation style needs to be characterised by the approaches identified by Raelin (2007) noted earlier and needs to work towards instilling a capacity for critical reflexive practice. According to this model participants in groups and in plenary debriefs are asked to openly reflect on their insights, the impact of the experiences on them, and the implications of those insights and lessons for their own practice – as leaders, managers, organisational members and people.

**Conclusions**

According to the testimony of many participants, the leadership module in our EMBA has been a transformational experience. The relative success of the program suggests that it might be worth persevering with the challenging task of translating the insights from contemporary constructionist leadership theories into practical leadership
development programs. While many have called for a reliance on action learning methods and similar approaches which directly integrate participant learning with their work practice, our experience suggests that a different approach to experiential learning might also have a role to play. Specifically we see value in exposing participants to different non-business fields of practice as a means of engaging with novel and confronting experiences, and generating new insights.

To what extent, though, does this kind of experiential program contribute to the development of a style of leadership more consistent with a relational approach than more conventional leader-centred approaches? At the most general level the program is about learning from different fields of practice (and, by implication, leadership in those fields) and highlights that different (and sometimes similar) things matter in those different fields. This clearly problematises the notion that what counts for performance, or excellence, or effective leadership is in any sense universal, and opens up the possibility that effective leadership means different things in different contexts. At another level the program moves through a number of analytical stages: the introduction of leadership as socially constructed; sensemaking as a collective and ongoing process that is a core part of leadership practice; and, the role of different concepts, techniques and values in different fields of practice, each characterised by different (and constantly changing) organizational, cultural and strategic contexts. Each of these seeks to contribute to understanding leadership as a practice to which all organisational members contribute and which is emergent, fluid, negotiated and constructed. At a third level the program also involves a number of distinct learning practices: the continual use of teamwork, a heavy reliance on giving and receiving feedback, and the facilitation of group critical reflection sessions at the end of each
perspective. These three learning practices seek to emphasise and reinforce that learning and leadership are inherently collective, collaborative and relational processes.

Taken together these approaches, experiences and learning practices can help participants learn more than simply new knowledge and new skills; they can also help participants achieve, what Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) see as the heart of relational leadership: a new ‘way of being-in-the-world’.

References


