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Developing Leadership As Dialogic Practice

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DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AS DIALOGIC PRACTICE

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The movement toward understanding leadership as an emergent outcome of interlocking practices represents a profound shift in leadership scholarship. This is so in several significant ways. In contrast with much traditional inquiry, the focus shifts from independent entities to interdependent or co-constituting amalgams. Thus, there are no leaders independent of the relationships of which they are a part. Leadership is thus an emergent outcome. Further, the relational amalgams of interest include not only human beings, but the physical world of which they are a part. Thus, reconceptualized is the concept of "social" in the *social* science tradition. The present movement also departs from tradition in its emphasis on process as opposed to fixed attributes or structures. For example, rather than assessing the traits of good leaders or the structure of the organization, the focus shifts to the possibilities of ever changing patterns. Finally, the focus on leadership-as-practice favors a replacement of structuralist explanations of human action with a post-structuralist orientation. Muted are explanations of leadership that rely on processes or structures lying *behind* a pattern of action—psychological on the one hand and macro-structural on the other. Rather, the explanatory emphasis is centered on the ongoing patterns of relationship. For example, to explain the function of a given utterance, we might look to the pattern of ongoing exchange in which it is embedded—including bodily actions, the physical surrounds, and the traditions from which it draws.

At the same time, it is important to realize that this movement in leadership scholarship is also synchronous with developments elsewhere in organizational studies, and indeed within the intellectual and professional world more generally. The shift of focus from independent entities to relational amalgams has captured the interest not only of organizational scholars (see, e.g., Gergen, 2009; Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006), but scholars across the sciences (see,

for example, Donati, 2011; Mitchell, 1988; Pickering, 1995). Similarly, organizational theorists have joined ecologists and post-humanists, among others, in attempting to undermine the human/non-human binary (Braidotti, 2012; Law & Hassard, 1999). Possibly reflecting the rapid transformation in global conditions, the shift from structure to process has been pivotal in both organizational scholarship (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth & Holt, 2014; Hernes, 2013; Hernes & Maitlis, 2010) and elsewhere in the intellectual world (Gergen, 2015). More radically, this focus on process subtly undermines major assumptions of the positivist orientation to social science. Because entities disappear into co-constitution, and stabilities give way to process, the traditional scientific commitment to illuminating a systematic, and predictable world of cause and effect falls moribund (Deleuze, 1994; Ingold, 2011; Keller, 2006). And, it is possibly the twentieth-century shift in literary theory—from structuralism to post-structuralism—that paved the way for contemporary explanations that focus on relations among actions themselves, as opposed to off-stage abstractions.

These are enormously stimulating developments in theory, metatheory, and metaphysics. As the present volume attests, they have also given rise to new forms of organizational analytics and approaches to research. But what is to be said about the contribution of these ideas to ongoing practices in contemporary organizations? At what point do these innovative developments in theory and inquiry begin to make a difference to our common forms of leading, organizing, and daily living? There is no falling back on the early empiricist view that our theories and research are somehow laying up treasures in the storehouse of Truth. Rather, as academics we too are engaged in an array of practices. The question is whether our academic practices remain lodged within our own circles of participation, or can be used for the enrichment of cultural life. It is to such ends that we address ourselves in the present offering.

Both authors have a longstanding interest in relational leading, and most relevant, to the function of dialogue in leadership practice (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). Whether an organization prospers or perishes, in our view, depends importantly on the relationships among its participants. These relationships are primarily dialogic in character. Thus, the important question is whether our dialogic practices can bring diverse people or groups into productive coordination, ease or eradicate conflict, motivate and inspire people, and handle the emotional dynamics that bring people together or push them apart. We also believe that dialogic processes are optimally conceptualized in terms of practice, as that term is employed in the present volume. However, for us, the major challenge is one typically described as *knowledge transfer*. If dialogue is conceptualized as a form of relational practice, how are those skills acquired that will contribute to effective organizational functioning? It is this question we address in what follows. First, we outline our approach to "dialogue-as-practice." This will be useful in placing the study of dialogue firmly within the leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) framework. However, in many learning contexts—seminars, workshops, publications, and training

programs—we also find it useful to sketch out some of these assumptions as prelude to practical engagement. With these assumptions in place, we will then describe two pedagogical practices focused on leadership development. As we shall see, these will also link L-A-P to the educational process itself. We thus explore the synchronous relationship between leadership, dialogue, and education-as-practice.

Dialogue as coordinated action

As a scholarly endeavor, disquisitions on dialogue are impoverished. There is an enormous body of literature centered on the individual person. Psychological explanations of human behavior move across the full spectrum of the social sciences. Although less voluminous, there is ample inquiry into the nature of social groups or structures—families, organizations, nation states, etc. In effect, if we presume that the world is made of up independent entities, our interest will center on the nature of the entities. And if we primarily understand the world in these terms, relationships between and among the entities become difficult to theorize. Typically, we resort to billiard-ball, cause-and-effect explanations. Historically, the study of dialogue—inherently a relational phenomenon—is thus a late-comer to the academic world, and finds no home in any traditional field of study.

Furthermore, in cases in which dialogue has taken center stage, most accounts are highly prescriptive. Most theorists celebrate dialogue as a cherished form of exchange. Difficulties result from the reasons for cherishing dialogue being many and varied. In Buber's seminal work (Buber, 1923), dialogue is a special way of orienting to the other, in which boundaries are broken, and one ultimately approaches a state of spiritual unity. David Bohm's (1996) popular book, *On Dialogue*, defines dialogue as a form of communication from which something new emerges; participants must evidence a "relaxed, non-judgmental curiosity" (p. ix). Grudin's *On dialogue* champions the "reciprocal exchange of meaning ... " (Grudin, 1996, p. 11). In contrast, Putnam and Fairhurst (2001) see dialogue as a route to the convergence of views. Eisenberg and Goodall (1993) are concerned chiefly with enhancing the voices of minorities. Isaacs (1993) defines dialogue as "a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience" (p. 25). And for Maranhao (1990), dialogue should generate the kind of skepticism that invites continuous inquiry.

Rather than equating "dialogue" with any particular vision of ideal interchange, we find it useful to return to the simple, traditional, and more neutral definition of dialogue as conversation. Of course, this definition is also ambiguous and conceptually thin. Moreover, most existing accounts of dialogue derive from the individualist tradition. Each participant serves as an independent entity, and their utterances are viewed as outward expressions of private mental states—intentions or meanings. On this account, dialogue is a form of inter-subjective connection or synchrony. Public actions are expressions of private meanings. We will not describe here the profound and intractable shortcomings of this dualist,

or mind-world, account of communication (see, e.g., Gergen 1994). Rather, in keeping with the L-A-P orientation, we bracket the realm of mind (the structuralist orientation), and focus on discursive actions themselves. We focus on the function of utterances within ongoing conversation. We draw here especially from Wittgenstein's (1963) metaphor of the language game, Garfinkel's (1965) explorations of ethnomethodology, Austin's (1962) illumination of the performatory character of speech, Shotter's (1984) concept of joint-action, and the writings of the Bakhtin circle (Bakhtin, 1981) on dialogism.

Given dialogue as a public practice, how can we theorize the process as relational, or co-constituted? Here it is useful to begin with the utterance as a simple, vocal sound. At what point, we might ask, does a vocal sound become a word, that is, a meaningful component in a system of language? In a recent film, *Mr. Turner*, Timothy Spall portrays the famous painter J.M.W. Turner as a man little given to articulate expression. Rather, in this portrayal Turner frequently responds to his consociates with a series of grunting sounds, or utterances. Yet, the sounds are neither random nor biologically necessitated. Rather, they serve as meaningful integers within the conversational flow. What grants them the status of words is essentially the manner in which they function within the ongoing conversation. For example, if someone is speaking to Turner, he grunts periodically at the close of the speaker's sentence. The speaker would then proceed to the next sentence. One might say that the utterances indicated that Turner was paying attention, and whether he agreed with the speaker or not, affirmed that the speaker was understood. Or, to put it otherwise, the grunts came to be language as they were integrated into a pattern of *coordinated action* (or co-action).

To press further, the particular meaning of an utterance is not contained in itself, but acquires its meaning largely by the way it is taken up by one's consociates. If one tells a story, and no-one pays attention, the story is no more meaningful than random grunts. However, if others respond in laughter, the story becomes humorous; if they respond in anger, the story has been an irritant. The story is neither humorous nor irritating in itself, but becomes so in the process of co-action. In this context, Wittgenstein's (1963) metaphor of the language game is also useful. The metaphor calls attention specifically to the coordinated or rule-relevant activities of the participants in generating meaning. The words, "strike" and "home run" acquire their meaning by virtue of the way they function in talk of baseball. Words invented by a single individual (a "private language" in Wittgenstein's terms) would not in themselves constitute meaningful entries into dialogue. In this sense, the traditional binary separating monologue and dialogue is misleading. The term monologue cannot refer to the utterances of one person alone, for such utterances would fail to communicate. It would not constitute language. The meaning of any utterance depends on its functioning within a relational matrix. Monologue is better understood as an extended (or dominating) entry of a single voice into a dialogue; in this sense monologue is dialogue with uneven participation.

The process of co-action is not simply an exchange of words alone. Again to draw from Wittgenstein (1963), the language games in which we participate are embedded within broader *forms of life*. This is first to draw attention to the embodied character of dialogue. Clearly the efficacy of spoken words is fastened to the simultaneous movements of the speakers' bodies, tone of voice, and physical proximity. The efficacy of one's words may depend importantly, for example, on whether one is clutching a shovel, a dagger, or a bouquet of flowers. Further, dialogic efficacy cannot ultimately be separated from the material context. Thus, the meaning of "strike" and "home run" do not only depend on the rules of baseball talk, but on their function within a form of life that includes balls, bats, bases, fields, players, umpires, hotdogs, and so on. Broadly speaking, the ways in which we walk, talk, laugh, cry, worship, engage in warfare, and virtually everything else we do, become sensible—or not—by virtue of collaborative action. In Bakhtin's terms, "to live means to participate in dialogue." And by implication, we gain insight into leadership-as-practice by viewing it through the lens of dialogue as practice.

In what follows, we offer two applications in the domain of leadership development that take dialogue as the linking vehicle to effective leadership practice. In the scenarios depicted, readers will note that the unit of analysis is the relational process, not the actions of individuals. As a leadership practice, the outcomes of the process may be a transformation of the very pattern that encouraged the first word or gesture. In this way dialogue can potentially overturn the historical trajectories in which we live.

Dialogic scenarios: Generative and degenerative

With the concept of co-action in place, we may explore its potential both for patterning and emergence. Every conversation is at once familiar and unique. It is familiar because we always borrow from past traditions of co-action. Indeed, if we did not draw from a common tradition it would be difficult to communicate at all. At the same time, every conversation is unique, as history and context are always changing. The same words spoken a second time will not have the same significance as the first time, simply because they are a repetition. Consider warnings, reprimands, or funny stories. The polysemic process is without terminus. Yet, it is useful to focus first on that which is familiar, as it provides the background against which we can treat the challenge of emergence.

Drawing from pragmatic linguistics, the concept of the *adjacency pair* is helpful, directing our attention as it does to the linking of two utterances, first from a speaker and then from a responder. What is most interesting about such pairs is their conventionality. If you have been exposed to the first, you will typically be conscious of what can or cannot follow. Among the simple cases: *question/answer; compliment/appreciation; greeting/greeting; request/comply*. We also find in these pairs an illustration of the principle of co-action as just described. A question becomes

a question by virtue of its being answered; an answer is an answer by virtue of its following a question; nor can compliments and greetings stand as such until there are compliances and reciprocal greetings. Daily life proceeds as smoothly as it does primarily because we simply repeat the familiar sequences. However, our conversations are seldom limited to a single pair. Conversation unfolds over time, and can take many different directions. We can term these broader patterns *dialogic scenarios*. Dialogic scenarios are common patterns of conversation. Three of them are especially important in terms of skillful engagement in dialogue: *sustaining, generative*, and *degenerative* scenarios. Sustaining scenarios are embodied in the common, day-to-day conversations or chit-chat that has no specific goal. Although such conversation may seem a waste of time in the organizational setting, it is in just such conversation that participants are assured of their good standing, forge friendships, create trust, and otherwise contribute to a positive morale. In generative scenarios, however, there are often goals—either implicit or explicit. Here the participants build on each other's contributions, as one might say, the conversation "goes somewhere." There is learning, creativity, and possibly a sense of delight. Many of the dialogues suggested by the literature on creativity by design (Gaynor, 2002) or which take place in the "design" phase of an Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney & Yaeger 2000) would be illustrative. In both cases, participants are positioned in such a way that they add significance and dimension to each others' offerings.

In contrast, degenerative scenarios move toward silence, animosity, or the breaking of a relationship altogether. They may begin subtly: one offers a proposal, and the reply is a critique; one gives an order, and there is sullen resistance; one blames the other, and the reply is counter-blame. All these adjacency pairs can invite subsequent degeneration. Arguments can often take the form of degenerative scenarios. Argumentation as a scenario is particularly interesting in terms of co-action. Each interlocutor attempts to present a strong position. However, the antagonist will typically locate ways of discounting the position—through inattention, changing the subject, or demonstrating the weakness of the position. In effect, what the speaker takes to be a strong argument does not register in the dialogue as a strong argument. Likewise the offering of the antagonist. Professionals concerned with conflict reduction are often resistant, then, to Habermas' (1981) view that the honest exchange of good reasons will produce accord. The good, objectively supported reasons of one are subverted by the good and objectively supported reasons of the other. Practices of bargaining, mediation, and collaborative peace building offer more promise.

Conversational choice-points

As proposed, dialogue borrows from longstanding traditions or scenarios. With sufficient repetition, the moves become naturalized. They have been practiced so often that they sometimes seem biological in origin. We are told, for example,

that responding to an attack with aggression is a genetic propensity. This naturalization of our conventions is especially important in the case of degenerative scenarios, for it is just such scenarios that can bring tension, antagonism, and disruption to an organization. It is here that the concept of conversational choicepoints is important. In principal, *whatever is said makes no requirements on what follows.* An utterance only comes into meaning through the co-active response. An utterance only becomes blame or criticism, for example, by virtue of how it is supplemented in the utterance that follows. In this sense, every turn in an ongoing dialogue offers a choice-point. Whatever has been said, the next speaker has options to create its significance. Thus, in every utterance, one has the potential to move the conversation in a generative or degenerative direction. This is only a "potential," and not a determinant, as one's interlocutor now stands at a choice-point, and the significance of one's utterance can be reshaped.

At times it is difficult to realize the availability of these potentials. One becomes "lost in the argument," or "moved by righteous indignation." Yet, as we have seen, every utterance also bears traces of myriad contexts of usage; every utterance is polysemic in potential. What might conventionally seem to be "a funny story," for example, may also be seen as "an ingratiating tactic," "narcissistic," "a wasting of time," "an avoidance of intimacy," and so on. In a Bakhtinian sense, participants bring with them heteroglossial repositories—vast and largely unused potentials for shifting the direction of dialogue. The challenge of leadership is that of accessing the repository, or indeed, forging new amalgams. For example, the scenario of mutual blame—in which Person A blames Person B for a failure, and B replies by blaming A—is ubiquitous. The direction is degenerative. Yet, history does supply a range of less obvious moves in the game, including apology, accepting partial blame, making light of the situation, abandoning the scenario either through silence or commentary on the scenario itself. The important point is that mutual blame is not a fixed scenario; participants always have a choice of whether and how to play.

Understanding as a relational achievement

We finally turn to the issue of understanding. It has long been held that dialogic process can play a key role in producing mutual understanding. Whether such understanding is a matter of moving from chaos to order, or resolving conflicts within the organization, dialogue is the major means to this end. How is it, then, that we come to understand each other, and why is misunderstanding so common? What is it to "understand" for which dialogue serves as the vehicle? These are important questions, but we rapidly realize that the traditional concept of understanding is unserviceable. Our common view of understanding draws from the dualist tradition touched on above. As we say, to understand someone is to "know what's on his mind," "what's in her heart," "what she is thinking," and the like. That is, we rely on a structuralist view that meaning lies somewhere

"inside the head" and words, gestures, and facial expressions are only the vehicles through which meaning is conveyed to others. What can a post-structural approach offer as an alternative? Here it is first useful to touch on the problematics of the traditional view. The problem of interpreting other minds has challenged some of the West's most learned scholars for several centuries. In philosophy the challenge is often characterized as the "problem of other minds" (see, e.g., Avramides, 2001; Ryle, 1949); for Biblical scholars it is the problem of hermeneutics, or how to properly interpret text. How is one to understand God's intentions from the words of the Bible, the Prophet's wishes from the verses of the Koran, or an author's intentions from a poem or complex text? For some 300 years, hermeneutic scholars have been devoted to working out a plausible rationale for justifying interpretations of texts. Yet, there is no commonly accepted solution. The problem is particularly difficult to solve, because there is no principled relationship between "a thought" and an utterance; no utterance is a necessary indicator of any particular thought. If a colleague says to an office mate, "I am not happy with your work," is this an indication of a minor frustration, a major irritation, or simply a casual comment? Or, perhaps it is not any form of unhappiness, but simply the individual's style of talking, a power maneuver, or a signal of pathology. Or, perhaps it is none of these ... or all of them simultaneously! Yet, any attempt to clarify the meaning of the utterance will yield but another utterance (or bodily signal). Because this signal too has no principled connection with an intention, its meaning remains equally ambiguous. The interpreter can never exit the *hermeneutic circle*, a self-referring process in which no interpretation can be justified save through reference to yet another interpretation.

It is here that the post-structural view becomes a major asset. On this account, we abandon the mind/action dualism, and turn attention to the process of co-action. In this frame we can trace the production of mutuality not to minds, but to collaborative action. This view, in turn, gives us new purchase in the problem of what it means to understand. Mutual understanding may essentially be viewed as a form of scenario, or in Austin's (1962) terms, a mutually felicitous pattern of coordinated actions. It may be, for example, to tell a story of grief to which the other replies with sympathy, to tell of a troubled situation to which the reply is quiet advice, or to voice a strong opinion to which the other assents. Reducing conflict in an organization is thus to move within dialogue in such a way that a degenerative scenario is subverted, and replaced with a sustaining or generative scenario. Mutual understanding, then, is akin to dancing smoothly or paddling a canoe together.

Leadership and the development of dialogic skill

We shift now to a more direct concern with enriching dialogic practices in the context of organizational leadership. In developing leadership-as-practice, what learning processes can best impart "dialogic knowledge?" Here we immediately

confront a significant challenge. We traditionally view knowledge as inhering in a set of propositions. Thus, books and journal articles are means of disseminating knowledge, and the library is viewed as a storehouse of knowledge. The learning process is essentially about mastering and applying propositions, and the central pedagogies are didactic in form. We might thus conclude that the mastery of the above account of dialogue would enhance skillful participation in dialogue. There is some wisdom in this view, but it is limited. A manager might well be sensitized by this account to the relational nature of dialogue and the many ways in which his or her words may be misunderstood; he or she might begin to search for new "ways to talk" and begin to understand how much his or her status as manager depends on relating well to those about. But, ultimately, this account is a form of "propositional knowledge"; these are propositions "about the world" but removed from specific locations of applicability. This practice in "knowing that" gives us little purchase in the market place of "knowing how" to participate in the practice of dialogue. One cannot learn to be a skilled tennis player entirely through reading a book on tennis. How, then, to move theory into action? In what follows we share two approaches in which we have been engaged. The first relies on dialogic rehearsal and reflection, and the second on role-play.

As scholars, we first turned naturally to our major means of imparting what we take to be knowledge: the written word. But in this format how could we move from propositional knowledge to knowledge in practice. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that one cannot be dialogically skilled as an independent individual. Leadership is created in co-action, and no participant can control the meaning of his or her own utterances. Any proposition dictating "how to do it" would not only be misleading, but continue to support the tradition of the individual leader. We thus set out to write a form of textbook, *Relational leading: Practices for dialogically based collaboration*. In each chapter we first included accounts of various aspects of dialogic process, reflecting many of the ideas discussed above. In effect, the reader was introduced to a practice orientation to leading. The intent here was not to dictate practice, but to sensitize the reader to dimensions of his or her subsequent practice. Second, we created a set of dialogic scenarios—written scenes from everyday organizational life. Our aim was to engage our readers in a *vicarious rehearsal*, that is to draw them into the drama in such a way that they might imaginatively pretend they were participating. In this way we were making use of a common cultural process in which we listen to stories as if we are the protagonist. Importantly, we listen to stories by commonly asking ourselves, "what would I do under the circumstances?" In this way we subtly prepare ourselves for future contingencies.

Yet, because of its inherently unpredictable character, we felt that sensitization and vicarious rehearsal of dialogue were insufficient. We thus added a third and reflective component to the pedagogical process. Rather than didactically explaining to readers why we thought certain conversational moves were superior to others, we attempted to energize their own reflection. If there are

fundamentally no "right" or "wrong" moves in a conversation, to what should one be sensitized? For what should one be readied? An analogy to learning skills in chess is relevant. A teacher can develop on paper an array of possible board configurations, and ask the learner what move he or she would make in each of these cases. The two of them could then discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each. One thus gains increased sensitivity to the pros and cons of possible moves.

We drew from a repository of scenarios common to organizational life, including for example, scenarios related to team development, guided organizational change, interpersonal conflict, organizational innovation, and coaching. Perhaps the greatest challenges to leadership originate in contexts of conflict—disagreements, jealousies, injustices, competitions for power, and so on. As we have also seen, conflict can commence with any adjacency pair, and the slide into degenerative scenario can be rapid. This means that those in leadership positions can easily be swept into such scenarios. Here we share one such conflict into which we invited our readers (from Hersted & Gergen, 2013):

> We're in a development department of new products in the computer games industry. Claudia is the manager of the department with 30 employees, and Kevin is the head of one of her project groups.
>
> KEVIN: Look Claudia. I need to talk to you. Do you have a moment?
> CLAUDIA: Of course. What's up?
> KEVIN: It's about the decision you made yesterday at the staff meeting about closing down the new project.
> CLAUDIA: Yes. So, what's the problem?
> KEVIN: I was very surprised that you decided to close down the new project without talking to me about it first.
> CLAUDIA: Well, I knew that you would just fight against closing the project, so why should I discuss this issue with you?
> KEVIN (RAISING HIS VOICE): Well, I'm the coordinator of that project. You appointed me to be responsible for it, and I've been working hard on it. I really put a lot of effort into it. So don't you think you owe me some respect? You should have talked to me about it before announcing the closure?
> CLAUDIA: Don't be so emotional, Kevin. This project had become a waste of money. You knew that, and just kept working on it without monitoring what was going on. It wasn't paying off, and I tried to tell you that in a dozen ways. It was an interesting and expensive experiment, but it's now time to just let it go.
> KEVIN: This isn't fair! The project was under development, and we just started it four months ago. We're in the middle of a process, and we've been involving a lot of people and stakeholders. How can you just close it down without discussing it with me? I could have shown you the

strategy for the project ... and you might have understood the logic ... actually we were on a good track ... .

CLAUDIA: Actually I gave you a chance, Kevin, but you and your people didn't create any results, and you didn't listen. Look, the competition in our business is hard, and we can't waste our resources on projects that don't pay off. I have to make the decisions here, and they aren't easy. But this one was clear.

KEVIN: Well I'm fully aware of how we spend our resources. I just think that you should have talked to me first. The way you did it was disrespectful to me and to the people who've been working hard on this project.

CLAUDIA (RAISING HER VOICE): Oh... Kevin, your arrogance is the problem here. I dropped the project because you weren't capable of realizing what a failure it was! Anyway, you should respect my decisions without questioning. I am the boss, after all, and I need to work with people who trust my decisions; so don't fight against me. The issue is closed.

(Kevin walks out of Claudia's office, slamming the door. The next day he delivers his resignation.)

At the close of the scenario we invited the readers into reflection. We posed several questions that created connections between the actions in the case and the conceptual framework outlined earlier. Consciousness of the scenario-like quality of such interchanges, the possibility for multiple constructions, and the origins of meaning in co-action were all paramount. We thus asked, for example, "How would you characterize the scenario in this conversation?" with the intent of sharpening the reader's consciousness of the way in which the co-active moves escalated the hostility. We then asked, "Can you trace the responsibility for the outcome?" with the aim of drawing attention to the co-active creation of the scenario. To highlight the socially constructed nature of the realities each brought to bear, we asked, "Did either Claudia or Kevin have the better argument? Was either right?"

Crucially, we also directed attention to the conversational choice-points. We asked where in the dialogue could either Kevin or Claudia have made a different move, one that could possibly invite the other into a less antagonistic reply. We encouraged readers to dip into their own conversational repositories to locate more satisfactory alternatives. Could they avoid the degenerative slide? In sum, our attempt was to develop a new form of "textbook" in leadership, one that was congenial with the conception of leadership, dialogue, and learning as practice.

Developing dialogic skills in action

If the aim of leadership development is to enhance skill in practice, the limits of a text-based pedagogy are clear. There must be immersion in the actual practices,

an enlargement in "knowing how," such that leaders become "creative way-farers" in dialogic relationships. In this light, one of the authors (LH) developed a leadership development practice that situated potential leaders in the context of ongoing action. The pedagogical practice here made major use of role-playing, combined with creative reflection. The main idea was to develop a skill-enhancing pedagogical method drawing from the rich traditions of the dramatic arts and group coaching. In the case of the dramatic arts, playing the role of another person—for instance a young boy, a colleague, a mother—the "actor" begins to move and speak as the other. During the role-playing the "actor" becomes bodily involved and begins to experience the world from the perspective of the other; hereby acquiring the skill to "identify with the other." In this process the "actor" begins to grasp and understand the logic of the other person and the context from which he or she re-acts in various situations. The ability to change perspective and identify with others can be an important step in enhancing leadership skills in connecting to and relating sensitively to others. The role-playing directs attention to different embodied ways of responding (see also Shotter 2012), which means an expansion in communicative resources. This learning through *mimesis* is fundamental to role-playing.

At the same time, as in the preceding practice, the idea was to add a reflective dimension to the role-playing. In addition to enriching one's skills for dialogue and action, it seemed essential to expand consciousness of the skill. Through reflection, one can generalize across diverse contexts, deliberate on shortcomings, and actively consider new alternatives. In part, this concern with reflection was realized as participants both enacted roles and commented on the process. Often, they were encouraged, on the basis of their comments, to create and enact alternative scenarios. In this way they became active "spect-actors" (Boal, 1979). To intensify reflection and create a collaborative learning space, we made use of a reflecting team consisting of individuals who looked at the episodes from multiple perspectives without judging the "actors." By working with the reflective team, the participants began to reflect on the episodes and possibilities for improvement through alternative actions. Through the dialogue the participants began to practice *reflection-on-action* with the hope of enhancing their subsequent capacities for *reflection-in-action* (Schön, 1987). Essentially, then, through a process of engaged role-playing combined with polyphonic reflection, the hope was that participants would acquire both dialogic skill and an expanded relational awareness in their daily organizational practice.

The dialogue training involved some 60 participants over an 18-month period, and included those in managerial positions and employees in an institution that provided care for neglected adolescents. In the project the participants worked with episodes from their own organizational context—episodes selected and presented by the participants themselves. These episodes dealt with challenges concerning communication and relationships, and reflected tensions that often had led to polarization, alienation, and conflict within the organization and in

relation to the surroundings. These tensions and conflicts not only involved managers, employees, and external working partners, but the young people living at the institution, their parents, and other important actors. Episodes touched on the use of force, sexual abuse, prostitution, alcohol and drug abuse, deviation from the institutional rules, tensions among managers and employees, conflicts in the group, along with ethnic and cultural conflicts within the organization.

The chosen episodes often contained what Mezirow calls *disorienting dilemmas* (Mezirow, 1994). According to Mezirow, working with disorienting dilemmas can lead to important and possibly *transformative learning*. Drawing from these dilemmas, the participants physically played out and experimented with different scenarios, employing what we might call *embodied imagination*. While working with these challenging episodes or disorienting dilemmas, we questioned the actual practice (in gentle ways) and tried to look at the episodes from new perspectives and to reflect on and experiment with different options for communication and action. The idea was to move from degenerative to generative scenarios by focusing on conversational choice-points. In this way, the project worked with the notion of learning-from-within a social situation and reflecting on it. Learning is here understood as being embedded within relational action, experience, and experimentation. The efficacy of these experiences was further enhanced through the following components.

Learning goals

Working from within a constructionist premise and drawing on inspiration from action research, it was important to initiate the dialogue training process by inviting the participants into a dialogue about the desired learning outcomes. While talking about learning goals and listening to each other, the participants clearly inspired each other and several of them started building on each others' ideas by adding dimensions to their own learning goals. Among the learning goals, the participants mentioned their wish to explore how they could talk together more openly, become better at listening and communicating, gain clarity on their roles and tasks in the institution, and be more appreciative. The participants wrote their learning goals in personal notebooks and after a little dialogue in plenary, they presented these on a poster hanging on the wall. During the process of dialogue training we often returned to these learning goals, and some were modified and refined by the participants themselves. For instance, one of the leaders declared in the first phase "I wish to be clear in my communication" as his personal learning goal, and then later on in the process, he modified it to "I wish to be clear and appreciative in my communication." This kind of development suggested that the group was engaged in a transformative learning process.

Rules for play

The dialogue training was extremely serious on the one hand, and on the other, it also contained many playful aspects. The latter were important to loosen up and build confidence among the participants as well as to enhance motivation. According to earlier research, rules, play, risk-taking, and creativity can be considered closely connected and interwoven (Chemi, Jensen & Hersted 2015). According to Huizinga (2002) play is a "free activity" that is more or less structured by its own rules and unfolds in accordance with its own boundaries of time and space. Play is "standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary life' as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (p. 2). Therefore, to create a frame for the work, we agreed on rules for being present, focused, non-judgmental, and respectful.

Facilitation

LH served as the facilitator throughout the process. The first task was a matter of ensuring a nurturing and trusting frame for the role-play experiences. Furthermore, it was important to ask reflective questions to facilitate dialogue. In these processes it is essential that the facilitator takes a humble or *not-knowing-position*, while simultaneously organizing and guiding the process. The facilitator must encourage the participants to imagine alternative scenarios in appreciative and respectful ways. It is a question of being and moving *with* the participants, but at the same time carefully challenging their taken-for-granted assumptions. The facilitator can never be fully neutral (impossible from a constructionist perspective), but should attempt to be an attentive observer and an inspiring co-creator.

The polyphonic reflecting team

As a central feature of the learning, in each role-playing session selected participants served as a reflecting team. Participants were told that they were not obliged to do the role-playing, and that it was fully legitimate to participate as observing and reflecting team members. The selected members were positioned as active observers of the episodes enacted by their colleagues. Before the *mise-en-scène* began, each of the reflecting team members was given tasks by the facilitator consisting of observing and listening from specific perspectives, for instance the perspective of an adolescent, a teacher, a social worker, a team leader, the director of the local municipality, a representative from the union, a mother, a father, etc. The team was encouraged by the facilitator not to express judgments but instead to show *curiosity* and *wonder* in humble ways based on their observations. The reflecting team members spoke directly with the role-players by invitation from the facilitator, and they were also encouraged to talk together publicly as a team about what they had observed during the role-play. Sometimes a member from

the reflecting team was inspired to join in and replace one of the role players to experiment with alternative ways of moving in the dialogue.

General learning outcomes

Was this form of learning-as-practice effective in strengthening skills in leading through dialogue? "Efficacy" is always a problematic word, as there are important questions of power and multiple perspectives in terms of what counts as effective, for whom, and with what consequences. However, it was important to acquire a sense of how this form of pedagogy was experienced by the participants, and if there were ways in which it could be improved. To this end three semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted, each of one hour's length, with three representatives from different categories of participants in each focus group (e.g. designated leaders, pedagogues, social workers, school teachers, kitchen workers, and people employed in the administration). The feedback from the participants suggested that the process yielded positive learning outcomes. In the following we offer a few of the comments from these focus group interviews concerning embodiment, plurality in perspective, and improvisational readiness.

Body consciousness

Something that makes this approach different from more traditional leadership training methods is its dimension of embodiment. One learns in and through action. We are dealing here with embodied knowledge, or in Shotter's (2012) terms, a *knowing-from-within* or *an understanding of a relational-responsive kind* (p. 107). However, from a pedagogical standpoint the important question is whether participants emerge with an enriched sense of the ways in which bodily expressions contribute to dialogic outcomes. There are positive indications. As one of the participants expressed:

> It is important to consider if it is appropriate to assume a relaxed and loose body posture depending on the person you are having a conversation with. It is also essential to think about how open and inviting your appearance is, and just all in all to think about if the position you are sitting in is suitable for the social environment. Often I am sitting with my arms crossed like this, and this position I mostly try to avoid at work also depending on who I am talking to.

Another added:

> The awareness of one's own bodily expression is really important, and I have definitely felt this awareness, which is a good thing. Also if I know that I am going to have a certain conversation with someone, I am now able to run

the event through in my head before the meeting starts and use some of the things we have learned. I am able to imagine which scenarios will possibly take place in the forthcoming conversation ... and I also use this when dealing with other colleagues but in a different way.

This latter remark was particularly interesting, as it expanded the pedagogical aims of the project. It suggests that role-playing invites the imaginative rehearsal of possible scenarios as a kind of *private theatre* where inner dialogues take place. One may then enter dialogue with greater preparedness and a larger conversational repertoire.

Plurality in perspective

As reasoned earlier, role-playing the lives of others should be useful in expanding perspectives. One learns in an embodied way how to identify with the other. A number of participants affirmed that indeed the practice did succeed in enriching perspectives. As one of the managers expressed:

When circumstances ask for it, you remember some of the things you have learned and are much more aware of what kind of position and approach you should choose. Because of that, I find the exercises rather useful. When I'm going to engage in a conversation with someone, I think about the different techniques I can choose from, and sometimes I take the perspective of a student and place myself in his/her position. That would possibly work when trying to get a social worker to take a different approach and ask the right questions like: how would you think about it if you were in the students' position? [...] I have made use of that method, also in relation to the teachers. In specific situations I have asked the teachers to identify with the students, and feel what it is like to be in their situation.

Another participant expanded on the issue of perspective:

Well, I think it is very useful to experiment with different perspectives. If you are dealing with a person it is unquestionably a good idea to try and see things from the other person's perspective. And, the ability to do that is something you can work on for the rest of your life, because it is actually very difficult to see things from a different perspective than your own. Sometimes specific situations cause particular reactions, and ... well, in that way I find the things we have learned very useful.

It is interesting to see that the participants realized the emergent character of dialogue, the significance of context, and the utility of reflection in preparing for improvisation.

Readiness for improvisation

Given the enormous variations in the content of any scenario, and the fact that every turn offers a choice-point for multiple alternatives to follow, the key to successful participation is improvisation. One of the aims was that participants would come away with an enhanced flexibility and a readiness to adapt and create as the situation allowed. The preceding remark suggested that many did benefit in this way. As one of the participants also pointed out:

> During the role-playing exercises I have learned a lot and received a different and new view of certain conflicts and aspects, and I know that my group members had the same experience. After the exercises I often heard people talking: "why didn't we do it like that, why didn't we say this instead of that ... ?" In that way it definitely seems like we all learned a lot.

It appeared that the training challenged taken-for-granted assumptions. By reflecting from different perspectives and trying out alternative solutions the participants appeared to expand their repertoire of communicative acts. We emphasized the point that there are always multiple ways of responding and one always has a choice. One of the managers added:

> It's the real challenge, I think, when trying to use all these things looking forward. Acknowledgement is the necessary and important thing here. For instance when X is saying: "Maybe we should try to replay the thing you just did before?" I find it a great idea. It is useful to think about what you can change and do better ... and, also trying to learn from each other.

These comments and others from the focus group interviews suggest that role-playing, combined with a polyphonic reflecting team, can be a useful tool for facilitating leadership development. Instead of illuminating fixed, linear strategies for action, emphasis was put on improvisation or "wayfinding" (Chia & Holt 2008) in a continuous and largely uncharted interchange. The majority of the managers and employees said that they learned a lot about communicating with their colleagues, other working partners, the adolescents living at the institution, and the parents of the adolescents. They also noticed the beginning of positive change in their organizational culture. In general, it appeared that the educational practice contributed to the participants' communicative skills in constituting reality, building up generative and sustainable relationships, constituting identities, and the creation of new opportunities and new practices in the organization.

Conclusion

Our aims in this chapter have been several. First, we have attempted to link the account of L-A-P with an account of dialogic process. By unpacking a theory of

dialogue-as-practice, we can see more clearly some of the implications for action in the organizational context. The actions of people take place, by and large, within dialogic relationships. Further, we have attempted to link these twin concerns with the challenge of leadership development. How can the theoretical orientation of L-A-P be cashed out in terms of developing dialogic skills? This led us, in turn, to conceptualize the pedagogical process of leadership development as a practice (essentially, pedagogy-as-practice). In this context we reported on two attempts to enhance leadership skills in dialogue, the first text-based, and the second, action-based. Although these accounts are necessarily limited, and leave many important questions unanswered, there are several implications that deserve special attention. At the outset is the more general question of how to link the highly general and abstract array of concepts included in the practice orientation to leading to actual activity. In part this is the question of the pragmatic utility of practice theory. As we see it, the focus on dialogue is ideally situated as a linking vehicle. While it is difficult to know how to formulate such concepts as relationality, process, and emergence in terms of ongoing action, the practice of dialogue is experience near. Thus, to articulate a theory of dialogue in terms that are congenial with the general orientation, lends itself to actionable consequences.

To extend this discussion, it is an interesting question as to whether the conceptual components of a theory of dialogue may be effectively extended to the full range of activities comprising organizational life. For example, a theory of dialogue is primarily focused on discursive exchange. At the same time, the practice of dialogue is a fully embodied performance. But in what degree can the concepts congenial to this context (e.g. co-action, scenarios, choice-points) be extended to non-discursive actions (e.g. relations with technology, food, nature, physical structures)? Herein lies a topic for rich discussion.

A second issue emerges from the particular practices of leadership development outlined above. A practice orientation to leadership is unique in its removing leadership from the minds and actions of individuals, and placing it within co-constituting relationships. While intellectually bracing, such a view is difficult to assimilate into leadership development programs composed of participating individuals. In effect, one works with individuals as a means of enhancing a relational process. And for the individual, there is no skilled action until another's actions affirm it as a skill. Is such a pedagogy not misconceived? As suggested in the second project described above, it is fruitful to work with multiple participants at different levels in the same organization. Enhanced coordination within such groups should contribute to the organization's collective intelligence and capability for action.

Yet, we should not underestimate the potential of individual-centered development for relational enrichment. We have laid out a theory of dialogue that points to the potential for an individual, at any choice-point, to perform in such a way that the ensuing dialogue may move in either a generative or degenerative direction. And, while the performance does not demand or require the interlocutor's subsequent response, there is what Pearce and Cronen (1982) call a

logical force that will favor one ·response over another. If greeted by a friend, it is highly conventional to return the greeting (as opposed, for example, to singing a song or staring at one's shoes). Failing to respond with a greeting is to risk alienation. Thus, the greater the one's resources for performance, the more likely one may enlist the cooperation of the other. In the project described above, trainees were essentially increasing their resources for action at the choice-point. Like seasoned basketball players, they were learning how to move effectively within the ongoing flow of complex relational patterns. In this sense, action and reflection may indeed contribute to one's capacity to invite less conflictual, and more productive relationships within the organization and without.

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