

## Leadership as Reflexive Positioning (second draft: 18/9/08)

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### Introduction

Working as a leader on a systemic basis creates a lot of opportunities – and some challenges. Systemic theory and practice are based on the assumption that as human beings we understand and make sense of the world in our own unique way and that language thus is a vital ‘tool of practice’. Hence, systemic practice often takes the shape of organised processes of reflection aiming to provide the participants with new thoughts and ideas about their own practice and their mutual practice (Hornstrup et.al. 2005; Barge, 2004).

If you look at descriptions of this practice in an organisational context you will find very little about the more hardcore aspects of organisational life, such as economics, legislation, professional standards and standards of quality<sup>2</sup>. For most leaders, these issues are important ingredients in what makes a good leader in their own understanding and in the understanding of the employees. Therefore, working with a systemic inspired approach to leadership, we should also deal with how to handle those aspects of practical leading and managing.

In our view, systemic leadership is seen as the coordination of understandings, expectations, emotions, and actions in an ongoing interaction and dialogue with the many interested parties internally and externally in order to realize the objectives lying at the heart of the organisation. Every speech act is framed by the local and ephemeral structure of positions, the distribution of rights and duties to think and act in certain ways.

When we choose to use the concept of *positions* we are motivated by the importance we attach to language as a vital tool of leadership. As systemic inspired leaders, we are aware that the language we use plays an important part in describing and creating the world that we are a part of. By transforming concepts from the infinitive such

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<sup>1</sup> Edited version of Hornstrup et.al. 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Campbell 1994, Barge 2003, and in Danish: Haslebo & Nielsen 1997, Voetmann et al 2003, and Haslebo, 2004.

as *leadership*, *organisation*, and *communication* into the present participle, i.e. *leading*, *organising*, and *communicating*, we create concepts with a more dynamic and process-oriented organisational understanding. Here, we can use Harré's descriptions of the difference between the concept of *role* and the concept of *positioning* to help us make other choices (Davies & Harré 1990; Harré & Von Langenhove, 1999). To us, the concept of positioning implies a more reflexive understanding of practice – as opposed to the concept of role, which implies a more static and formal understanding of leadership practice. Of the utmost importance is the intuition that the apparent rights and duties of the leader may be changed by redistributions of rights and duties among the immediate group of people involved, say the members at a particular meeting of a team. These short lasting realignments of the moral order may have far reaching consequences.

Choosing to describe leadership as positioning of both self and others enables us to view the different aspects of organisations from different perspectives. It can be seen both as the leader's active positioning of herself and others and as other people's positioning of the leader.

The leader's active positioning of himself or herself may have to do with the way she relates reflexively to the objectives and tasks of the organisation. Such a positioning can be used to create a general view and to focus on the many different areas that demand the attention of the leader. It may be the reflections that the leader has before he or she enters into a dialogue with others; or it may be in a reflexive dialogue with employees as fellow workers, using the techniques of tacit positioning to maintain the hegemony in act performance that is required of a leader.

Secondly, positioning can be seen as the leader's more specific positioning of herself in her dialogue with employees, colleagues, and other collaborators. Here, the leader can choose to take the position that seems the most expedient with regard to coordinating the understandings and actions of the involved parties. It may even involve momentarily abandoning a certain right or duty.

In addition to the leader's own (pro-) active positioning, the leader will also be positioned by employees, colleagues, and other collaborators. Their wishes, statements, questions, and actions will imply a more or less explicit positioning of the leader – a wish regarding the starting point that they want the leader to take when dealing with the matter. Often such a positioning is not quite explicit, and the 'sender' is not always conscious of

the positioning implied in his or her statement. However, the leader has a choice, also when positioned by others. In fact, the leader can use these leader positions as an active tool by being conscious of the positioning implied in the statements that others make and by acting on it in his response to those statements.

In this reciprocal process, systemic leadership can be seen as a constant reflexive process with the leader looking for the best possible way of creating and participating in relations with the surroundings, while at the same time dealing with the way he is positioned by others, e.g. by their expectations and actions.

We choose to use the concept of leader positions rather than leader roles in order to highlight the point that systemic leadership entails the maintaining of a general reflexive perspective, that is dynamic rather than working within a fixed and predetermined moral framework. We wish to emphasize the special considerations and responsibilities that always lie with the leader because it is his or her task to help define and maintain his or her employee's attention on a variety of organisational objectives. This does not mean that the leader is not actively involved in performing the specific tasks. Both leaders and employees are involved in doing the daily work. What we want to emphasize with our use of the concept of leader positions is that in the last instance, the responsibility of reaching the set goals always is a key part of leading since in the last analysis the assignment of duties is the key to achievement of goals. If it is unclear who has the responsibility for what action in the evolving story-line of the organisation nothing but trouble ensues.

## **Expanding the Positioning Concept**

'Positioning' originated as the concept best suited to identifying the moral location of an actor in the local order of rights and duties. Once positioned a person had access to the use of certain social acts constitutive of the narrative with which the story-line of an institution, family, committee, rock band and so on evolved. It soon became clear that the legitimacy and success of positioning acts, either of one self or of others depended on a prior step, the laying out of the person attributes, real or imaginary, that sustained the ascription of rights and duties. This has been called pre-positioning. Positioned as having the right to measure out the ingredients for a cake I have to be granted the skill to make use of the measuring equipment. Positioned as having the right to manage a business a

person is tacitly, and sometimes explicitly, considered to be in possession of certain characterological and personality attributes.

In this paper we extend the notion of 'position' in another direction, incorporating the general contents of the social acts that identify a position along another access. When positioned in the local moral order by pre-positioning in relation to the assignment of rights and duties, what is then that a person is informally legitimated or authorised to do? The four positions set out in what follows are content rich descriptions of the range of topics which one who has been pre-positioned as a competent leader or employee and then positioned as having a certain cluster of rights and duties can exercise their rights and duties upon. Let us call these 'position contents'. With respect to the original lay-out of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) the position-contents are derived from the situated story-line of the strip of life under analysis.

In order to make the content of leadership as reflexive positioning more concrete we have chosen to work with four main position-contents, each of which can be divided into a number of sub-contents. These positions should be seen as a starting point from which the leader – alone or with his colleagues, employees or collaborators – can view the wide variety of considerations and tasks of the organisation. Among these are the more hardcore aspects of organisational life such as economics, legislation, and the quality of products and services rendered, as well as communicative and relational aspects of the organisation, such as cooperation, the personal and professional development of the employees, knowledge management, and leadership communication.

The four leadership position-contents provide a comprehensive view of the story-line of the organisation and none of them can be seen as independent of the others. Together they make up a many-sided insight into the organisational system in which the leader acts while at the same time creating a broader view on the surroundings of the organisation.

Together the four leadership position-contents constitute a platform from which the leaders and their employees can obtain an overall view of things that they can use as a basis for reflection on various aspects of the organisation and its surroundings, as the story-line unfolds. By this we mean that leaders have to view the organisation as a part of a greater system, from an observer's position. At the same time, these positions may be used at a more action-oriented level to help coordinate a general view of things

with a more focused attention on a number of important areas and the basic question of the positioning acts that fix who does what, in the sense of the distribution of rirths and duties with respect to the realising of the position-contents set out in the table below.

**Figure 1.12 Focus Areas of the Four Positions**

Position	Focus
Organisational leadership position	Visions and strategies Legislation, rules, collective agreements Financial and other resources
Production leadership position	Professional goals and development Quality assessment and improvement Planning Product development
HR leadership position	Information, communication & relationships (internally and externally) Organisational culture Working environment and job satisfaction
Consultant's position	Challenging and developing individuals and groups Personal and professional development Carrier development Knowledge management

From the **organisational leadership position** (the organisational position) the focus is on the owners of the organisation and the demands and expectations of the central interested parties, as well as the more specific framework of resources and economics, relevant legislation, and collective agreements. It is important to maintain the rights and duties of the organisational position with respect to the associated position-contents in order to run

and develop the organisation in a way that complies with external expectations in the best possible way. The organisational position also focuses on the coordination of external expectations with the internal life of the organisation. Here, one of the most important *tools of action* is to ensure the (co-) creation and implementation of visions and strategies and to help turn these into specific goals.

We have chosen to use the designation *organisational position* because we see the word 'organisation' as a context marker of the general organisational goals and framework. Figuratively, it serves to orient us towards the general considerations which should govern decisions and actions in all parts of the organisation. It is one way of expressing the presumed coherence of the story-line, the on-going biography of the organisation that the various members create. We use it to accentuate that to us it is very important to create and intensify an attention to the general aims of the organisation. We emphasize this because it is our experience that often a clear indication of the goals and framework of the organisation can help to qualify discussions in many organisational contexts. We might introduce the idea of second order positioning at this point to capture the point that the story-lines of the mundane and limited everyday actions of the members must generally conform to the long term story-line of the organisation as a whole. One might compare this with the positioning that comes about with respect to the genealogical or cultural 'story' of a family and the local, day-to-day management of the activities of the breakfast table, with the appropriate positioning of the family members with their domestic rights and duties.

The **production leadership position** (the production position) focuses on professional skills and professional development, the development of quality and products, and on planning. Thus, relative to this position-contents awareness is on the transforming of the framework of the organisation and expectations of it (i.e. the organisational position) into a story-line and a number of professional objectives in the fields of quality and production. Also in this position it is important to establish a link between the surroundings and the internal life and processes of the organisation – to ensure that the organisation keeps up professionally with the development in the surroundings. This can be in terms of meeting the expectations of clients or users to products and quality, or of keeping up with the general development in the surrounding society – or the development of competitors, or it may just be about handling innovation or new educational initiatives.

Also the designation *production position* has been chosen to sharpen our awareness of professional insight and quality of performance. Here we return to the notion of pre-positioning. The rights and duties of those whose task it is to attend to the professional positioning-contents must rest in the end on actual or attributed skills and other personal qualifications. Thus, we try to make it clear that, even if systemic ideas traditionally have a primary focus on communication, professional standards and standards of quality are important to a systemic leader as well. The assessment of the surroundings (and of the employees) of the reliability of the organisation is often founded in their assessment of the professionalism and quality, which they experience or connect with the organisation. This is, of course, the very process of pre-positioning which we have emphasized above. Furthermore, the production position can be an important context marker internally in the organisation as the position which puts an emphasis on professional standards.

Both the organisation and the production positions can be seen in connection with the domain of production (Hornstrup et al. 2005) focusing on the more specific and factual issues.

From the **HR leadership position** (the HR position) focus is on how to coordinate staff resources in the most expedient way possible for the organisation, its members, and interested parties. Here we are aware of relations and the interaction between individuals, groups, and departments, on how to manage and generate knowledge, and on cooperation and the well-being of the employees. Thus, it is from the HR position-contents that focus is on the creation of an appreciative, curious, and reflexive culture of cooperation and communication serving to further performance and achieve defined objectives.

In addition to this internal focus from the HR position, the leader also has her attention directed towards participating in and creating formal and informal networks which can help to strengthen and promote the organisation, while at the same time giving the organisation access to valuable information. All this may involve highly complex first and second ordered positioning among those involved.

The designation *HR position* has been chosen to create an image of a cluster of position-contents from which the positioning of people to take responsibility for the development of the resources and relations of the organisation is the primary focus. It is

important for leaders to be aware of the fact that they should participate in the creation of relations and connections in a way, which supports the primary task of the organisation.

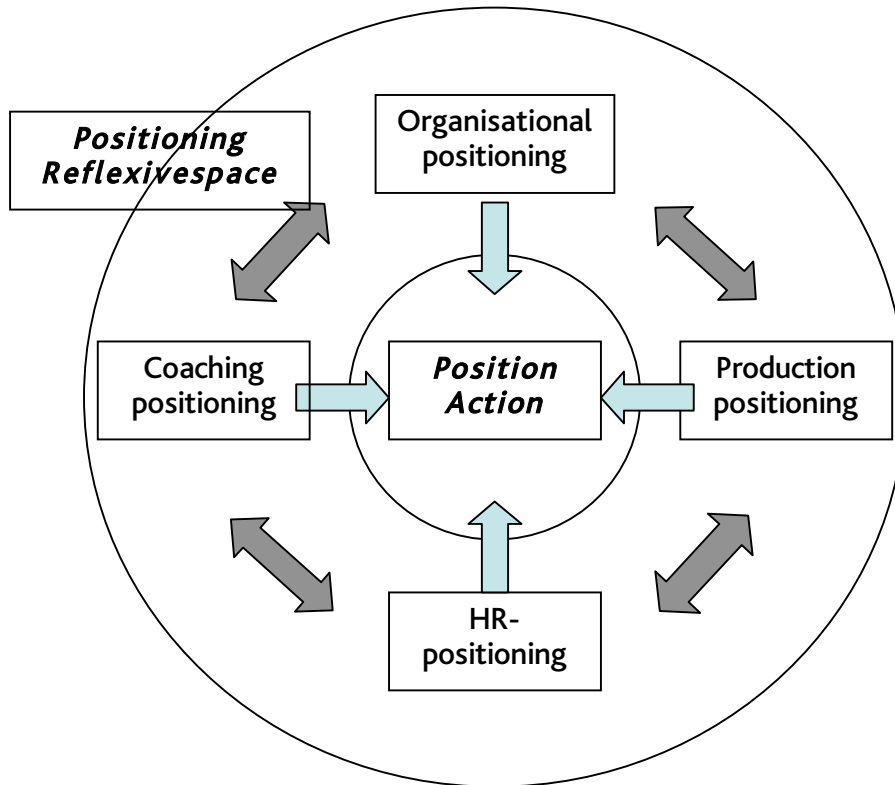
At a more specific level, the HR position focuses on the development and maintenance of the various organisational development projects, such as appraisals and training programs. Furthermore, the HR position focuses on recruitment and procedures of recruitment. These are tasks and the way positions to act in these ways, commensurate with the position-contents is a crucial part of the way the moral order of the institutions is maintained. Managing this group of position-contents also includes positioning of someone with the duty to look at the well-being of the individual employees in order to ensure a good physical and mental working environment with an appropriate balance between people's work life and their private life. However, there may be no correlative right to enquire into personal matters of personnel!

From the **consultant's position**, the leader focuses on whether the individual employee or group of employees get the necessary support, whether they are challenged and developed. One of the important focus areas from consultant's position is the implementation of the various initiatives to develop the organisation. The task is to ensure a continuous sharing of knowledge between individuals and groups so that the skills and experiences of all employees are put into use and so that the careers of the employees are enabled to evolve through personal and professional development. Typically, this takes place through appraisals and coaching sessions with the individual employee and with groups. Once again we see the importance of the relationship between pre-positioning in which matters of skill, competence and experience are salient to the consequential assignment of rights and duties to carry out performances so ascribed. Thus, from the consultant's position a major part of the attention is directed towards ensuring the coordination of training programs, appraisals, and coaching sessions in a way that furthers the development of both the organisation and the individual employee in the best possible way. All this is a matter of taking care of background to the essential pre-positioning assessments which make possible actions that tend to realize the favoured story-line rather than some other one.

Figure 1. Shows positions-contents and relative positionings as a reflexive space between tasks and surroundings.



Figure 1. Leader Positioning



### Using Positioning

When dealing with how to actually use positioning in practice, it may be appropriate to look at a couple of important points. Firstly, the positions should be seen as closely connected and as made up by a large number of sub-positions. Secondly, we should be aware that they can be used at all organisational levels – from top management to the employee. In general, there should be a pattern of hierarchical positions in which rights and duties are coherently organised.

Thus, there is a seamless overlap between the moral orders that are required to realise the four groups of position-contents. From the organisational position there is a clarification of the general objectives and framework, which make up the foundation of the other positions, that is the implicit story-line becomes visible and can be matched where necessary with the explicit story-line. Often these two narratives do not fit all that well.. This framework constitutes the basis for the definition of the professional objectives with regard to products and quality, that is the explicit story-line. From the production position a

framework is defined with regards to how to organize the production, and how to cooperate and share knowledge. From the HR position a framework of rights and duties, that is actual positions, is created for the professional and personal development of the individual employee. At the same time, the resources and wishes of development of the team or the individual employee, the culture of the organisation with regard to cooperation, communication, and knowledge management, as well as the professional development internally and externally will influence reciprocally and thus have an impact on the general organisational framework and opportunities. One could say that together the four positions help to coordinate focus and thus to coordinate meaning and action. As argued in what one might call 'classical positioning theory' positions, storey-lines and social acts are mutually defining and determining (Harré & Moghaddam, 2002).

The advantage of using different positions that are so interdependent is that it enables us to see the tasks through different optics. Thus, leaders are able to distinguish between different managerial focus areas, once they become accustomed to seeing the action in terms of positions, that is in terms of rights and duties, in relation to an evolving story-line, *whatever that may actually be*. In the words of Bateson's definition of information, they can become *the difference that makes a difference* thus serving to make the complexity of leadership more explicit. That is it is not just a matter of assigning jobs, but of assigning rights and duties relative to those jobs, and their contribution to the evolving biography of the organisation.

The different optics of the leadership positions can be used by the leader as reference points for thought or action, a way to create a coordinated awareness across the the organisation. From senior manager to junior employee or between managers and between employees, a reflexive positioning can help create a clearer basis for communication and defining concrete tasks.

What specific tasks we have to do depend on where we are placed in the organisation. For a leader, a specific action-oriented task may be to draw up budgets or long-term strategies or to discuss issues with external collaborators. For the line manager, it may be to transform objectives and framework into specific plans or to have meetings with colleagues or employees. For the employee, it may be to look after a machine, to assemble a product, or to treat a patient. At all levels there is a specific task, a task space,

but there is also a reflexive space where you consider and reflect on the objectives, frameworks, relations, etc. that constitute the foundation for the best possible task solution.

Thus the leadership positions can be useful to coordinate understandings and action – across individuals, groups, and departments, and all the time in relation to the organisational context. If all leaders and employees are presented with the concept of leader positions, as second order positions, it is our experience that in the course of time they will improve their ability to see their actions and decisions in a broader perspective, that is relation to the favoured story-line. From this point of view, the leadership positions can make the individual employee aware of the fact that co-leadership demands a constant process of reflection where the choice between a number of different positions invites the employee to see his or her communication and actions in relation to colleagues, management, and other collaborators.

Leaders are constantly in a cross field of different interpretations of how to understand the organisational objectives and make them operational, of different conversational invitations and of which actions to take, to create positive effects in terms of moving the organisation in the desired direction. Being a leader in this field means that the leader has to actively position himself in relation to people and tasks and thus help (pro-) actively to create attention, relations, links, and clarifications. At the same time, the leader is also positioned by the understandings, actions, and expectations of other people. Thus, the leadership positions serve as an important point of reference providing the systemic leader and employee with a way of qualifying communication and understanding, creating a motivated basis for making more qualified choices.

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