

Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute

This month we welcome *Ann L. Cunliffe* as she shares thoughts on **Relational Leading**...

Relational Leading and the Meaning of Life

by [Ann L. Cunliffe](#)

There are three interwoven issues I'm passionate about in my work - relationality, reflexivity and imagination.

I try to incorporate all three in my research and teaching. I also believe these issues are central to leading and managing responsible and ethical organizations. Yet while they are often interesting to practitioners, they seem less so to academics.



I say this based on experience...I've lived and worked in business schools in the USA for 25 years, moving back to the UK in 2012. When applying for academic positions in the US, I was often asked what reflexivity meant and what it had to do with management and leadership - after all, it wasn't a topic covered on organizational behavior or leadership courses. My simplified response was that reflexivity is about critically questioning what we take for granted, what is said and not said, and what the impact might be, and that reflexivity had EVERYTHING to do with management. Even more challenging was the social constructionist /hermeneutic phenomenological perspective underpinning my research into management, leadership and sensemaking...perhaps because most US business school academics have not studied philosophy. And my use of non-positivist qualitative research methods and non-traditional forms of writing, including more imaginative narrative forms, makes getting published in top journals in my field challenging because of the conventional structured writing norms. For example, imagination is something to be 'objectified' - hypothesized, tested, propositionalized, and put into a nice self-assessment questionnaire - not actually used in research and writing. Objectification gets us out of all kinds of responsibility! But I persisted, continuing to research and teach with these ideas in mind, with the aim of encouraging leaders, managers and Ph.D. students to be more imaginative in the way they see and act in the world.

I teach leadership, not as techniques, theories or competencies, but as a relational, reflexive and moral activity[i]. This means going back to fundamental existential questions about the meaning of life: the nature of social realities, what it means to be human, and the implications for designing, managing and studying organizations. And what has become more important to me over the last few years, is exploring our lived experience from an intersubjective perspective[ii]. What if we begin to think about ourselves not as individuals, but as selves always in-relation-with-others? Those others might be individuals, communities, cultures. How might we begin to think about leading and managing differently from a relational perspective that foregrounds relationships with people not relationships between objects or relational mechanisms?

This way of leading relationally brings a moral and ethical responsibility for and with 'others' - what Matthew Eriksen and I have called relational integrity[iii], which means enacting ethics not just as institutional codes of ethics, but more importantly as interpersonal - situated in the way we relate with and treat people. The need for an interpersonal form of ethical leadership comes sharply into focus when we consider that organizations such as Barclays Bank and (dare I say) FIFA have quite extensive codes of ethics and yet are still enmeshed in scandal.

I believe the [M.Sc. in Relational Leading](#) is an important and pretty unique programme that brings the need for relationality and imagination to the fore. It encourages reflexivity and responsibility, rather than conveying conventional leadership theories and techniques, which have been criticized for resulting in managers perceiving themselves as morally-neutral technicians engaged in value-neutral activities which can be justified because they are 'rational' and 'efficient'.

[i] See Cunliffe, A. L. (2009) The philosopher leader: On relationalism, ethics and reflexivity - A critical perspective to teaching leadership. *Management Learning*, 40: 87-101.

[ii] Cunliffe, A. L. (2011) Crafting qualitative research: Morgan and Smircich 30 years on. *Organizational Research Methods*, 14: 647-673.

[iii] Cunliffe A. L. & Eriksen, M. (2011) Relational leadership. *Human Relations*, 64: 1425-1449.

For information on the Taos Institute MSc and Certificate program in Relational Leading, [click here.](#)