The dialogical leader®
Developing leaders for the future

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Introduction

In this article we present our view on Leadership Development which allows us to roll out successful leadership development programs with the CxOs. Our view is based on the concept of Dialogue. We explain the scientific background of the concept of the Dialogical Leader®. Although we refer to theory, the approach is a very pragmatic one, making use of and with respect for the seniority of the CxOs. With a simple generic definition of leadership we start the dialogue with leaders in our programs. Together we explore their ways of influencing, we investigate leadership roles, context, culture and of course, personality of the leader at our table. Dialogue, reflection and storytelling are the keywords for this successful approach, that brings rational analysis together with intuitive self-knowledge. In our LD approach we apply our concept not only on the participants but also practice it as facilitators ourselves during the program.

We describe the following themes. We start with the basic concepts of the dialogical leader. We give you a snapshot of what we mean by roles (I-positions) and give some examples. Then we describe the leadership model that we use as a common idiom in our programs: styles and sources of influencing, basic roles as a leader in terms of behavior. And last but not least: the assessment of effective leadership behavior in terms of relating that to the context! In the next step we go back to the I-positions to explain that differences have to be reconciled by dialogue. We reveal a list of top five questions, that – if applied appropriately – contribute to leadership effectiveness in an astonishing way. Finally we will give an impression of how we deliver a LD program.

Dr. Rens van Loon
The basic concepts of the dialogical leader®


My inspiration and guiding principle that enabled me to link the different roles of leaders, both theoretically and methodically, can be found in this concept of the dialogical self. Hermans describes the ‘dialogical self’ as ‘a dynamic multiplicity of relatively independent ‘I-positions’ in an imaginary landscape. (Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon, 1992, page 28). Applied to leadership, this involves ‘the leader in dialogue with his environment and with himself’. The ‘I’ has the opportunity to go from one position to another depending on changes in the environment over the course of time’. Dialogical relationships can be made between the various different I-positions or roles. Each role has a voice and its own story. It is significant for the various different roles of a leader, for example: entrepreneur, manager, coach and professional, to enter into dialogue with each other. In some cases we will conclude that some of the roles of a leader do not fit with the way a particular leader thinks he is. The roles turn out to be isolated, as it were. I would like you to illustrate this with examples based on experiences in your own career. Try to find illustrations where you used different roles, maybe even contradictory. How did you deal with that situation?

Dialogical Leader® basic concepts: dialogue, reflection, context

The secret of being a leader; searching for the essence
In your self as self reflection as inner dialogue with your core values, ambitions, motivations and competencies

With the other person as dialogue about values, competencies, personality, motivation and behavior

With the organisation and its core values, strategic ambition and

With society and culture

Reconcile or separate? An example
David became an employee of a consulting firm. He – with his wife - had a successful business as a two-person consulting firm, and they wanted to build up a larger business because they had the ambition to offer their services to larger client organizations. They were successful at that time in applying a specific tool. David and his wife had worked with this tool for several years after their university work, and they felt ready for an organisation which had more to offer than just one service. Within the consulting firm he was a passionate professional [IP I] and as such, a project leader. In addition, he was manager of the HQ [IP II], and they became partners, as joint owners of the firm [IP III]. These three I-positions/roles (professional, manager and owner) produced quite a few dilemmas. The roles sometimes seemed difficult to reconcile, the professional had different interests from the owner or the manager! David was also a scientist [IP IV]. Nor was there room any longer for the role of teacher [IP V], which he had fulfilled for more than 10 years. To conclude: David and his wife could tell their story from five different I-positions: professional, manager, researcher, teacher and partner. All of these stories are quite different and seemed to be entirely dissimilar.
Dilemma’s and dialogue

I have been impressed by the theories of Fons Trompenaars, especially in his book Managing people across cultures. We could apply this easily to the concept of the dialogical leader. A leader’s ability to resolve or ‘reconcile’ dilemmas at a higher level distinguishes him and can make a critical difference. Trompenaars applies this primarily at organisational level. Here are some examples of dilemmas: leaders are faced with: should I focus on the person or the deal? Should I guide things myself or delegate? Should I discuss problems openly at an early stage or cover them up and put them off? Should I structure things formally or informally? Should I make changes gradually, step by step, or all at once? We apply the concept of reconciling opposites in our approach of developing leaders. In our work as consultants we listen carefully to the leader’s story. We actively explore that story through dialogue, not only on leadership characteristics, but also on context and dilemmas. If a leader at our table is able to clearly describe various aspects of his performance and dilemmas in his own words in a mindful way, he most likely is able to reconcile, if there is a basis of courage and discipline. Breaking through routine behaviour requires awareness. In order to make patterns visible, we dive deep with the leader: he is invited to make his story explicit (as author of his self-narrative) and investigate it for underlying motives, personal and organisational values, I-positions as roles (as actor in his self-narrative). We achieve this based on the principles of the dialogue.

We facilitated David in his process to bring the diversity of his many roles together and to find the Oneness, hidden behind the Multiplicity.

Successful leaders reconcile dilemmas

A leader tries to get something done from a certain vision, with, for and through other people in a context, making use of different styles (vision, push, pull) and sources (rational, intuitive, non-verbal) in a multiplicity of roles (entrepreneur, manager, coach). The context is determined by the organisation and its culture, but also by the leader’s own personal values. The process of influencing takes place in the tension between the values and ambitions of the organisation and the personal values of the leader. We therefore get a double relationship of tension in the process of influence: to the outside in the relationship with the organisation; to the inside in dealing with individual preferred styles and personality. My assumption (and experience) is that effective and successful leadership implies that he/she is able to reconcile dilemmas, involved by incongruities. By moving flexibly between roles, styles and sources. By moving along these lines he/she is able to reconcile obvious opposites. The most important factor for success is that the leader is able to think, feel and act ‘out of his box’ (script, behavioural, emotional and thought pattern). Good leaders are flexible in this sense, without losing the relation with the guiding principles, core values or true North. It is simple to describe it here, it is most difficult to achieve because of the complexity of daily business life with so many unseen agendas, ambitions and politics. Recently a colleague of mine formulated the principle like this: “lead and follow, based on my inner compass”. Reconciling head and heart in new habits, for many modern leaders very difficult. Short term pressure is so huge!

With the support and contribution of my colleagues I wrote a book about this approach with the title The secret of being a leader. Searching for the essence. (In Dutch, Van Gorcum 2006). This book is translated in English and available in PDF format. The theory and practice in this book is leading for what I would like to explore with you.

Leaders in dialogue

Leadership effectiveness and development has to do with dialogue, reflection in a specific context. This implies the art of asking the right questions. A leader wants to bring something about: in the world, in a company, in a political party, in a religious community. In order to achieve this, the leader must influence others in his environment by language in different forms (non-verbal, rational, intuitive) through dialogue, conversation, discourse, discussion, exchange of ideas, communication. This implies the art of asking questions. A good question is one that opens the person at your table (mind, emotion), that enables him/her to start thinking or feeling in a new way. A good dialogue implies asking the right question, taking in and digesting the new information visibly in the interaction, giving feedback, and expanding your view.

Here is the top five of questions, a client requested me to make a list. If you are a leader, apply them on your own situation...
1. Exploring
Thinking about you being a leader, could you tell me:
what means leadership for you? What does it mean
for you to be a leader? Listen carefully, ask follow up
questions, especially examples, like:
• when you were younger, did you have the idea/plan
becoming a leader in your professional career?
• are you a leader in informal situations?
• how is your leadership expressed at home?

2. After having explained the basic elements of
leadership (vision – push – pull)
• could you give an example where you were high on
……..vision/push/pull.
• if you are normally more pushing/pulling, could you
find an example of the opposite pulling/pushing?
Let’s elaborate this example: were you effective,
what made you effective or not?

3. After having explained how you can influence
people around you (influencing rationally –
intuitively – non-verbally; head – heart - body)
• could you give an example where you were high on
……..ratio/intuition/non-verbal.
• if you are normally more rational/intuitive, could you
find an example of the opposite intuitive/rational?
Let’s elaborate this example: what made you (not)
effective?

4. After having explained different leadership roles
(entrepreneur – manager - coach)
• what is your preferred role? When do you feel at
your best?
• could you give an example where you were high on
……..(the role mentioned before).
• if you are normally more like a manager (structure,
push, processes), could you please find an example
of the opposite role (coach/entrepreneur)? Let’s
elaborate this example: were you effective, what
made you effective or not?
• having a look at your team, how would you describe
your role within the team?
• in what circumstances are you most effective within
the team? Give an example.
• in what circumstances/with whom are you less
effective or not effective at all? Let’s have a closer
look at this example.

5. Concluding
• what is the recurring theme in all that we have
discussed so far?
• what lesson did you learn today, that you can apply
tomorrow?
• what is the slogan for your current and future
development?

Dialogue between I-positions and roles
A leader wants to get others on board and influence,
inspire and enable them to do something for him/her.
But the leadership dialogue is also directed inwardly
when it is about the self-investigation. Time to reflect
is the one thing you need to know about leadership
(Buckingham 2005), in order to gain clarity about your
plans and ambitions, your sometimes unclear motives,
your different roles, the effect of your actions. Good
leadership, as effective leadership, is being able to
flexibly change related to what you want to realize,
the context and your core values.

The situation is sometimes so complex, because a
leader finds himself in between the organisation, its
mission and core values, and his own character, his
personal motives, his personality and intelligence. In
this dynamic field of tension, which cannot be exactly
expressed in any static appraisal, a leader operates
within a continuously changing context.

I would like to illustrate this with an example. In his
development within the mentioned consultancy firm
David felt how difficult and how important it was to
reconcile the various different roles with each other, to
be able to apply the different styles and make use of all
sources. David is a passionate professional, as said. He
enjoys working with people, individually and in teams,
large and small. He gets energy from seeing changes
happen in the people he works with. But the role of
entrepreneur also attracts him – responding to and
predict changes in the market, developing new services.
In the role of coach he does not come up to scratch
in his own organisation because he did far too much
himself (like so many other leaders) and delegated too
little. His way of influencing others has changed over
time. In the first years David was primarily rational,
convincing others of the correctness of his approach,
sometimes in an inflexible way. Grown by negative
experience he started using far more emotion and
intuition.
People are ‘dialogical’ in the sense that they are able (and often are forced by external events) to relate contradictory experiences to each other and even to reconcile them. Someone can be both open and closed. These terms are logically irreconcilable. Along the lines of argumentation (propositional thinking) this cannot be true, but in a story this could even be the plot why it convinces you (narrative thinking). Effective leadership is a puzzling combination of all these components! And in that multiplicity you as a leader - I - have to act as One! Simply said, difficult to do!

Leadership redefined
In our programs with leaders around the world we have made an important step by simplifying the idiom around leadership. We dropped the distinction between manager and leader. Peter Drucker describes this evocatively: ‘as for separating management from leadership, that is nonsense – as much nonsense as separating management from entrepreneurship. Those are part and parcel of the same job. They are different to be sure, but only as different as the right hand from the left or the nose from the mouth. They belong to the same body.’ (quoted from Covey 2004). And define leadership in a simple, but comprehensive way.

Leadership definition
Leadership as a process of reciprocal influencing, motivating and enabling (groups of) individuals to achieve a common goal.

Figure 1: Leadership concept

Following definitions in leadership literature:
• Leadership as the ability of an individual to influence, motivate & enable others, to contribute towards the effectiveness & success of the organization of which they are members
• Leadership as a process (reciprocal), whereby an individual influences a group of individuals (team) to achieve a common goal.
• Leadership as from a vision getting things done through other people in the context of organization, culture and individuals
Figure 2: Leadership styles, sources and basic roles

A leader influences through different styles:

1. **Vision** as setting direction for the company:
   - the why, compass, a point at the horizon, long term perspective, communicating the vision, inspiring, being a role model
   - charismatic & value based leadership (visionary, inspirational, self-sacrifice, integrity, decisive, performance oriented (Globe, p. 14)

2. **Push** as getting things done:
   - what & how, more focused on tasks, results oriented, instructing, commanding focus on I/me, myself
   - autonomous leadership (individualistic, independence, autonomous, unique);
   - self-protective leadership (self centered, status conscious, conflict inducer, face saver, procedural) (Globe, p 14)

3. **Pull** as through other people:
   - who, focus on relationships (from stranger – acquaintance – partner), enabling others to act, asking questions, showing understanding, listening
   - focus on You, other
   - team-oriented leadership (collaborative, team integrator, diplomatic (Globe, p 14)
   - participative leadership
   - humane oriented leadership (humane oriented, modesty)

A leader influences from different sources:

1. **Thinking** (head)
   - rationality, analysis, logic, truth, science (0/1)

2. **Feeling/intuition** (heart)
   - emotionality, intuition, narrative, authenticity, art/religion, images and symbols

3. **Non-verbal, body** (hands)
   - nature, my nature, non-verbal behavior, energy

A leader influences in different roles:

1. **Entrepreneur** (setting direction)
   - understanding external events, focusing on the future and turn vision into action, setting direction for the company;
   - examples of competencies: entrepreneurship, customer orientation, market orientation, creativity, vision.

2. **Manager** (building structure)
   - building organizational infrastructure, realizing structure in the organizational processes; directive and achievement oriented behaviors
   - examples of competencies: planning and organizing, management control, results orientation, delegation

3. **Coach** (developing people)
   - building collaborative relationships, sharing power and authority, managing attention, engaging other people, getting things done by other people, coaching and supporting, participative
   - examples of competencies: coaching, sensitivity, teamwork, persuasion, organizational sensitivity

In a qualitative dialogue we hit upon all these aspects. By inviting the person or team at our table to interactively reflect on these aspects and sharing their thoughts and reflection. By sharing they get feedback, by feedback people can become more open, freed from their own perspectives. The process is valuable in itself. There is no end to this development. We are satisfied, the client is satisfied, when they - instead of talking about one another - start talking with each other. However simply stated, this is very difficult.
Apply the rule for yourself as a test:
everything you said today about other people in your
environment, could you express that face to face to
them?

If yes,
Respect and trust will be your part

If not,
Reflect, reflect, reflect.

A client’s experience
Based on introducing and applying the concept of
the Dialogical Leader® to very senior leaders in the
organization I have made the following observations
and insights:

In using this model with senior business leaders, I
notice each of them being really touched and impacted
by the dialogue about their leadership. Standing at
the front of the room presenting themselves, their
context (e.g. transitioning to a new role) and their
personally relevant questions, they then receive
affirmative and constructive feedback in the form of
a team conversation. During this process of dialogue,
and inquiry and genuine curiosity on the part of
the leader, individuals start to realize how they are
appreciated; an element of leadership interaction
which tends to be under utilized in organizations. In
addition to this appreciation, the real learning comes
through a dialogue about how those around the
leader have experienced him or her when s/he has
been less effective. This is when the light bulb comes
on. Knowing how we come across to others is one
of the most difficult things to judge. My experience is
that after each leader has engaged in this process they
actually look more human because they have received
some specific positive feedback and have gained real
insights into how they could improve. Furthermore,
by simply experiencing this level and type of dialogue
process, the team becomes more connected, thereby
leading to richer and fuller business conversations.

In addition, I have heard of individuals continuing this
process off line as well in a constructive manner. Some
have described this to me as a pivotal moment which
transformed how the team work together. Naturally,
effective teams are composed of diverse individuals and
the leadership dialogue facilitates transparency so that
differences are turned to good rather than damaging
effect. The model when facilitated well combines
simplicity with power through a process of deep
dialogue and conversation, also for very senior leaders.
In my experience, teams I have worked with want to
continue on this journey and sustain the learnings and
benefits for themselves as individuals and for the team.

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An example of a leadership development program

Figure 3: content and structure of a program

In general the content and structure of a leadership development program contains following elements:
1. We introduce one leadership model for the company, with key concepts, leadership and organizational theory, individual modules, team modules, business and behavioral modules, coaching techniques and follow up methodology.
2. We enable current leaders to systematically reflect on their own leadership style and coach the new leaders toward the company standard.
3. We develop new typical company leaders in a systematic way within the company (training and coaching modules).
4. developing a value, personality and business profile to hire new leaders from outside the company.

Successful leadership development

The basic concept for proven successful leadership development is:
1. Real and realistic (self-) insight, based on reason, intuition and practical experience.
2. In the strategic ambitions of the company and the people that are working together.
3. In the core values of the company, why it is as it is and based on that the set of competencies you need to cover/develop.
4. In what it essentially means as a person to be (or become) a leader in the company, how this relates to your personal values.

Effective learning consists of a well balanced mix of pre-work (26%), dialogue and classroom learning experience (24%) and follow up (50%). This means that developing leaders has to be delivered along the lines of a completely different approach from the traditional way of training. We were used to spend most time in a collective learning process, just little time in preparing and follow up, although these have proven to be most critical for successful implementation and anchoring. We are able to facilitate the learning and developing process by means of e-learning and e-coaching (building a Leadership and Learning Portal). Deloitte has an extended expertise in e-learning (relations with Harvard University, Nick van Dam).

The building blocks for a program:

Individual Development Plan: Team Development Plan
We enable the company leaders to obtain a realistic judgment about strengths and development needs, values and motivation of the current leaders of the organization, both individually and as a team or platform. We give feedback on real life cases and meetings.

Set of Core Values, Competency Profiles, Training Programs
We design and develop a characteristic company training program based on a clear profile of the future leaders for the company: what competencies do they have, what kind of personality, what makes them effective, genuine and successful within the context of their organization?
The first step consists in defining - through company dialogue - the core values, the core competencies for the different levels Board, strategic, tactical and front-line, inclusively behavioral indicators.

**Tools and steps in the program**
The tooling building blocks of a leadership development program are:

- Starting memo (on line)
- Organizational assessment (on line) (current and preferred) (Business Maturity Model, INK scan, As One Diagnostic)
- Culture assessment (on line) (current and preferred (Culture Print, OCAI, As One Diagnostic)
- 360 degree feedback by self, superior, peers, subordinates (filled out on line, will be discussed in a dialogue meeting); based on the company core values and competencies + behavioral indicators (DDI, DLA, Reflector 360, In-Context 360°-online, Lominger)
- Personality assessment (on-line, will be discussed in a dialogue) (MBTI, NEO-Pi-R, Facet5)
- Performance management (the company’s performance tool) the relation between the outcomes will be discussed (MBTI, NEO-Pi-R, Facet5)
- Individual Development Plan (on line) to be discussed in a face to face dialogue
- Team Development Plan result of team sessions and team feedback
- Coaching (each participant will choose a coach for the next two years, and have approximately five meetings, some of these will be on-line coaching sessions).

**Outcome of these leadership programs:**
- A vision on good company leadership
- Set of shared company values and behavioral indicators
- Set of company core competencies
- Buy-in from company Top management
- Personal action plans, which will be followed up in the company performance cycle (individual actions to be integrated)
- Team action plans, which will be followed up during follow-up team sessions

**Duration of these programs**
- Individual sessions: between 2 hours and 1.5 days
- Team sessions: from 2 hours to 2.5 days

……the success of the program is in this follow up!
Dr. Rens van Loon (1955) is a director in Leadership & Organizational Development. He has gained experience in a wide range of Human Resource disciplines during his career as a trainer, scientist, manager and consultant. He has particular expertise in motivation and personality assessment in combination with leadership assessment, development and executive coaching. In April 2009 he joined Deloitte and has gained experience in Design and Implementation of (inter)national leadership programs, assessment centers, development centers, project management, organizational assessment and account management.

Rens studied Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands. After his studies he combined his activities as a consultant with scientific research. He completed his Ph. D. about motivation assessment based on Valuation Theory and SCM Method. He is a licensed SCM-consultant® and supervisor. He developed the concept of the Dialogical Leader® and is a member of NIP (Dutch Institute for Psychologists).

During his career Rens combined his activities for customers with writing and lecturing about leadership and development. For Océ Technologies, Heineken, Sabic, CRH Europe Distribution he developed a leadership program, combining core values, competence management and leadership development.

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