

Practices of Relational Leadership in Action Learning Teams

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Abstract

The problem statement that set the course of action for this study was: how could we re-frame leadership in a way that would support greater organizational capacity for facing the complex challenges of the contemporary world? In this paper, I summarize literature regarding the ongoing transformation of worldview from the enlightenment to the postmodern era, as well as key concepts from systems theory. Then, I review a range of literature related to the way organizations and researchers theorize leadership. From the broader field of published study, I select and present the theory of relational leadership as a basis for my research project.

The purpose of my project was to document the praxis associated with leadership when viewed from a relational perspective. I set out to construct a study where I could observe and be a part of relational leadership as it unfolded; as groups gave meaning to it through their dialog, interactions, and practices. With that purpose in mind, I framed my research question as:

How does relational leadership unfold and emerge over the course of a project? What are some of the key practices that enable and comprise relational leadership?

The project spanned three years, during which I observed 29 action learning groups in programs created to foster relational interaction rather than traditional team and leadership structures. In addition to my observations, I collected narratives from participant interviews and written surveys. My qualitative analysis of the information employed elements of method from narrative inquiry and grounded theory, as well as the epistemology of systemic-constructionism.

The outcome of the study is presented as a discussion of five practices which emerged in these groups as they evolved their coordinated and effective action: weaving a web of lateral relationships, working in service of the whole, meaning-making through dialog, converging on purpose and direction, and iterating design of the path and the destination. This study suggests that by engaging in relational practices, participants can enable leadership as a collective capacity for addressing adaptive challenges. Given that the relational view shifts attention from individuals to relational practices, this study contributes to the literature in that it provides insight on the specific interactions and narratives that helped to unfold and construct some of those practices.