Practices of Relational Leadership in

Action Learning Teams

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.

Acknowledgements

A relational approach to leadership shifts our focus from what it is that we do as individuals to what it is that we create together.

I express my sincere gratitude to all those who have supported me on my journey: my family, my dear friends and colleagues, my teachers and advisors, and all the learners who have danced with me over the years.

UBUNTU

I am what I am because of who we all are; I am because we are.

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Introduction

The End of Normal

To say that we live and work in turbulent times is an understatement. The world is rapidly evolving from a mechanized, industrial-based economy with leaders in positions of command-and-control authority to a more interdependent, complex knowledge exchange that requires new perspectives on leadership.

The interactive forces associated with globalization and technology are moving business organizations toward a new worldview, or perhaps multiple worldviews, to help us make sense of our reality.   In this new era, how can organizations shift their emphasis beyond individual leaders to a more collective, systemic, and relational construction of leadership – one which is more relevant to contemporary business challenges?

Transcending the command, control, and predictability paradigms of classical management science with newer theories of complex adaptive systems and relational leadership, organizations and researchers are attempting to construct shared meaning around the dynamic and collective inter-action that is essential for successful, sustainable businesses. We have a desire to change the conversation in a way that allows us to invent new options for action that were not available before. This can be done by letting go of previous definitions and assumptions about leadership, and being open to new ways of interacting as a relational community. As both a researcher and a business leader, I want to contribute to that purpose.

My Role As An Observer

My interest in a systems point of view began many years ago with my studies as an undergraduate, working in the field of biomedical electronics. Immersed in the world of physiology, I was fascinated by cellular components, and the ways these microscopic entities could interact to bring the emergent property of *life* to an organism. Later, I

carried that interest in living systems into my career as a business executive, and attended one of the first graduate programs in the U.S. that taught business from a systems perspective.

My role soon expanded to building international businesses, and I found that the relationships and interdependencies which formed a system-level organization were a focus for me. Sales could never be successful without service, manufacturing relied on procurement and supply chains; no separate functional area could subsist without the others. For me, leadership was about connecting people, opportunities, and ideas; creating shared purpose across boundaries; and then helping to bring collective energy to the processes which realized that purpose.

After 15 years in international business, I shifted to facilitating organizational processes and leadership development. Experiential learning was popular in those days, and I embraced the concepts of learning by doing, of action preceding understanding. I taught leadership through providing teams with novel experiences such as climbing Mt. Kinabalu in Borneo, hiking volcanoes in Indonesia, camping in the rain forest treetops in Thailand, and mounting an expedition to the remote tribal highlands of Papua New Guinea. During these journeys, I would ask participants to pause, reflect, consider their mental models, and engage in dialog about what assimilations or accommodations they were making. Those years taught me important lessons about reflection, dialog, group process, sensemaking, and collaborative learning, especially when faced with uncertain new environments.

My next step was a somewhat less adventurous career in consulting, helping organizations with large-scale change initiatives. These projects included work on a national education strategy in Singapore, a credit management solution for one of Thailand's national banks, and process improvements in Taiwan for the world's largest memory chip manufacturer. Once again, each of these challenges required a systems approach: broad collaboration that optimized for the whole rather than the parts. Over a period of 12 years, I worked with 400 client companies in 28 countries and interacted

with over 10,000 leaders as participants in facilitated programs. From those leaders, I learned much about the importance of relationships, collaborative dialog, and coordinated action as enablers of organizational leadership and change.

My present role allows me the privilege of leading the executive coaching business for one of the world's largest firms in the space of leadership development. In taking this role, it was my hope to help create a new perspective on leadership, one that would leverage my past experiences with multiple worldviews, a systems perspective, and reflective group dialog. Since I did not yet know how to define or articulate my concept of this new leadership, I went in search of a learning community to support my endeavor and found the Taos Institute. The program at the Taos Institute allowed me to explore a social constructionist stance for my project, and provided this dissertation as a channel to document my research and learning on the topic of relational leadership. Following is a brief outline of the dissertation.

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter 1: Implications for a New Era. Beginning with the Scientific Revolution and continuing on to the Enlightenment and Postmodern era, this chapter explores the evolution of Western thought and the ways our culture's worldview has evolved. In parallel is the emerging story of business organizations as they move from a mechanical, clockwork structure to a more adaptive, living network of parts and whole interconnected as a system. The chapter concludes by summarizing the increasingly complex challenges facing modern business organizations, and exhibits interviews with business leaders to present these challenges in more personal narrative form. The chapter summary calls for reframing the concept of leadership from a focus on individuals to one that is more aligned with postmodern worldviews and more relevant to contemporary challenges.

Chapter 2: Systems and Complexity. This chapter reviews current conversations on systems and complexity theory. Through this investigation, I present how the perspective and language of complex adaptive systems can be used to describe parallel characteristics

of relational leadership: as collective, interconnected and interdependent, dynamic and self-organizing, in open exchange with the context of environment, and adapting toward novelty and complexity. From this view, I offer that leadership can be viewed as an emergent property of the whole, rather than a reducible component of any individual.

Chapter 3: From Leaders to Leadership. Reviewing the research literature, I trace the evolution of how leadership is described, from the classical leader-as-individual outlook (grounded in the Enlightenment principles of individual reason) to more recent perspectives on leadership as relational, collective, and systemic practices of the organization (more aligned with postmodern thought). The chapter focuses especially on my selected theory of relational leadership, and presents an overview of those tenets.

Chapter 4: Design of the LEAD Program. This chapter describes LEAD: a development program which provides action learning participants with an opportunity to face a complex problem in a format that fosters relational interaction rather than traditional team and leadership structures. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the program, which serves as the platform for my research in this project.

Chapter 5: Research Design and Methods. This chapter articulates the core research question: *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?* It then presents the methods employed to collect and interpret data for this project. I discuss the research strategy, construction of the study, and my approach to data collection. Then, I highlight key points from my systemic-constructionist stance and present the qualitative methods I employed from narrative inquiry and grounded theory.

Chapter 6: Observations, Emergent Themes & Practices. Following the research design, this chapter presents the observations and findings: five themes of practices which emerged as groups engaged in 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.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions. This chapter concludes the dissertation by suggesting that participants can enable relational leadership as a collective capacity for addressing adaptive challenges by contributing to and engaging in these practices. I discuss parallels in the project findings with elements of theory, and with the emerging way that leadership is defined. I also present limitations of the study, and ideas for further research. Finally, I present my hope that this study will contribute to the literature in that it provides insight on the practical interactions and narratives of collectives as they construct meaning around relational leadership.

Chapter 1: Implications for a New Era

The Narratives of History Unfold

As history unfolds, so does the current narrative or *worldview*. This term evolved from the German word *Weltanschauung*, composed of *Welt* for "world" and *Anschauung* for "view" or "outlook." *Weltanschauung* refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual, group, or culture interprets, makes sense of, and interacts with the world, showing in its themes, values, emotions, and ethics (Palmer, 1996). Our worldview -- our narrative or story -- represents our society's collective agreements about what we consider as reality. The worldview is a shared perception of reality that holds a culture together and characterizes an age (Ackoff 1993).

> *At any given moment a story exists, and exists in relationship to everything around it. The stories we tell reflect our world, and the stories we tell make our world* (Margolis 2009).

Our stories and worldview have tremendous power to shape our culture, economy, and institutions. Self-fulfilling environments emerge and can be sustained for long periods of time based on the worldview of that age -- as long as people can locate themselves in a narrative, they participate in it and continue it (Parry, 1997). However, what happens when the current way of interpreting and understanding the world no longer fits the events of that age? At key historical moments, life pushes back on narratives that no longer fit. At such times, groups may begin to tell a different story, and thus participate in the transformative change of an age and its worldview (Ackoff 1993).

It was historian Thomas Kuhn (1996) who used the term *paradigm shift* to suggest what is required when a sufficient number of anomalies arise and the current worldview no longer provides a fit explanation. A paradigm shift, according to Kuhn, requires a fundamental change in the set of assumptions that undergird one's causal explanation of the world. For example, societies of the agricultural era viewed the world as simple,

connected, and organic. But with the dawn of the machine age, the story of the world became one of complicated parts held together with the inherent order of mathematical formulas and the universal laws of science. More recently, the world is frequently described as a complex, entangled, organic holism ranging from chaotic to only semi-ordered (Sahlins, 1972; Perdue, 1986).

As the worldview of an age evolves, so does the accompanying narrative concerning organizations and leadership. The chapter ahead traces several shifts in worldview that have occurred over past centuries. By reviewing these, we will discover remnants of past thinking that continue to persist in today's worldviews, and how these contribute to the various constructions of business leadership even in a contemporary world.

Rise of the Machine Age and Modernism

One era in which significant shifts in worldview occurred was the Enlightenment. Discoveries from the Scientific Revolution had paved the way for the period of the Enlightenment, which stretched from the mid-17th to late 18th century.

> *The Enlightenment was an astounding time for Europe. Relatively stagnant and weak and intellectually repressed by the Church during the so-called Dark Ages, intellectual energies repressed by the Renaissance came to fruition in the Enlightenment. During this time, Europe was reborn and became the center of an intellectual, technical and economic transformation* (Geyer, 2003; p. 1).

The Enlightenment sought to establish human reason as the bedrock of knowledge and foundation of authority, rather than the Church and its mystical religion. The Enlightenment was characterized by the view that an objective and rational understanding of the social world—derived from modern science—would help people to improve their living conditions. Enlightenment theorists believed that rational thought, allied with scientific reasoning, would lead inevitably toward moral, social, and ethical progress.

Gergen (2009) states that during the Enlightenment, "the soul or spirit, as the central ingredient of being human, was largely replaced by individual reason. Because each of us possesses the power of reason, it was (and is) maintained that we may challenge the right of any authority – religious or otherwise – to declare what is real, rational, or good for all" (p. xiv).

Newton's physics reduced the unknowable mysteries of the universe to simple mathematical principles, providing order, predictability, and understanding without relying on the heavens for explanation. Science reduced the staggering complexity of the world to terms that the human mind could more easily comprehend. Building on Galileo and other great empirical minds of the Scientific Revolution, Descartes' deductive rationalism and Newton's inductive reasoning set the stage for the "life as machine" paradigm: that man, through observation, rationality, and reason, could understand all phenomena as discrete parts that operate through linear, observable, and predetermined cause and effect (Dolnick, 2011).

Philosophers of the period proposed that by understanding the individual, mechanistic parts that made up the universe, one could determine and potentially improve the cause-effect relationships between these parts and thus improve the whole.

In the Journal of Applied Social Psychology, Siegfried Streufert (1997) writes:

> *After Copernicus, supported by astronomical observations of Galileo, the Earth ceased to be at the center of the universe. Galileo was probably the first scientist to use empirical observations and mathematics to measure and quantify observations. He argued that science should restrict itself to a study of essential properties of material bodies that can be quantified. In contrast, all subjective experience should be excluded from science.*
>
> *Mechanical clocks were well developed during the Renaissance. They became the model of how a mechanistic world must function; mankind merely needed to discover laws about the clockwork of nature.*

Thus, under the general influence of Galileo, Newton, and Descartes, the notion of a clockwork universe emerged. Indeed, clocks being the most common mechanical items in existence during the 17th century encouraged the closed mechanical outlook and became a defining analogy of the age. This prevailing view also gave rise to the concepts of determinism, certainty, and linearity in the natural world (Rogers, 1997).

In his book *Redesigning the Future*, Russell Ackoff (1974) writes:

> *The machine age taught us the principle of analysis: to understand something, we must first take it apart, then understand the behavior of each part separately, then assemble the understanding of the parts aggregated into an understanding of the whole. In an era that believed everything was reducible to indivisible parts was also the doctrine of determinism – the belief that all relationships between things were reducible to one single necessary and sufficient relationship of cause and effect. We didn't need the environment to explain anything, and we developed sets of fundamental laws that told us what would happen in a vacuum – when there was no environment* (p.9).

According to several authors (Geyer, 2003; Guneratne, 2003; Perdue, 1986; Wallerstein, 2000), the worldview arising out of this era included the following presumptions:

Order: There are objective truths to be discovered; knowledge is universal and can ultimately be expressed in simple, generalized laws. The validity of knowledge is capable of proof, supported by evidence. The use of language is descriptive – the job of science is to describe the universe.

Reductionism: The whole is the sum of the parts, no more and no less. Phenomena can be known through empirical means; the universe is observable, measurable, and quantifiable.

Determinism: Processes flow along orderly and predictable paths that have clear beginnings and rational ends. Underlying these regularities is the notion of causality; cause-and-effect relationships: the past determines the future.

These Enlightenment presumptions found realization in the emergence of large-scale manufacturing of the Industrial Revolution during the 18th and 19th centuries. Newtonian mechanics made possible the creation of machines, the substitution of machines for men as sources for physical work, and the rise of man's sense of domination and exploitation of the world. With the concept of "life as machine" firmly planted, businesses emphasized speed and efficiency (Houghteling, 2006). The era's basic social unit was the individual, and the science of management and leadership focused on the productivity of the individual (Conklin 2001).

The Industrial Revolution influenced almost every aspect of daily life for inhabitants of the western world. The wider use of machines led to dramatically increased production, an expanded system of credit and capital, and an improved transportation network crucial for raw materials to reach the factories and finished goods to reach consumers. In particular, the population size and the average income began to exhibit unprecedented sustained growth, and the era's promise of progress seemed very real.

However, as the 19th and 20th centuries played out, the Modern era proved to be more brutal than any other in history. While the period following the Industrial Revolution enabled much positive growth – textile weaving, steam engines, machine tools, and high-throughput iron production – it was also the era of the Great Depression, two world wars, the Holocaust, widespread industrial pollution, the A-bomb, and other large-scale calamities (Witcombe, 1995). As these events unfolded, many began to question the Enlightenment's promise of rational science leading to the progress of mankind. Perhaps it was time for a new story to describe the current reality.

Postmodernism

As scientists began to explore broader into the universe and deeper into the atom, they began to question their reliance on Newtonian physics – realizing that these "laws of nature" worked only within the narrow range of Newton's instruments: the physical boundaries of Earth (Louth, 2011). These fixed laws fell apart in space or at the subatomic level, as Einstein and the new quantum physics showed. Tetenbaum (1998) proposes that at some point in recent history we realized "the Newtonian vision of an orderly universe no longer exists. The new world is full of unintended consequences and counterintuitive outcomes." Similarly, Streufert (1997) writes *"Newtonian approaches have reigned for more than 300 years. They have served us well. Nonetheless, we may once again be at the threshold of change."*

The Enlightenment had displaced humankind's prior conception of the world as an organic, living, spiritual entity (Capra, 2004) with its central concepts of individual reason and progress. The Modern era had built on those concepts, advancing progress through machines and industry. And yet, as suggested by the quotes of Tetenbaum and Strefert, some groups began to push back on the current worldview and offered a more skeptical interpretation of progress and reality. This skepticism and critical thought toward the Modernist worldview grew into the movement of Postmodernism. Postmodern authors were critical of the Modern era, offering that science had separated us from essential elements of humanism, as in this quote, which spurred my own critical thinking:

"The vision of a tightly-interconnected cosmos has been fractured by the abandonment of questions of meaning and purpose, by narrowed perspectives and aims, and by a literalism ill-equipped to comprehend the analogy and metaphor fundamental to early modern thought. The result is a scientific domain disconnected from the broader vistas of human culture and existence" (Principe, 2011).

Postmodernists lost faith in the fixed laws and grand meta-narratives of the Modern Age, proposing that these were stories told to legitimize various versions of "the truth." Distrusting all-encompassing frameworks, postmodernists argue that our fragmented,

fluid, indeterminate, and diverse social world cannot hold single truths, and instead they emphasize that multiple voices and perspectives best support meaning-making (Ospina and Dodge, 2005).

As an alternative, Lyotard (1984) proposed that grand meta-narratives should give way to *petits récits*, or more modest and "localized" narratives – the cohabitation of a range of diverse and locally legitimized language games. In agreement with these views on multiple narratives, other authors write:

> *At the core of modernist stance is the belief that there is a single truth about our objects of study and that it is possible to approximate this truth with some certainty, independent of our subjectivity (objectivism). Reality is discovered. In postmodernism, there are multiple truths. The most we can do is to gain a glimpse of these truths through interpretation of people's negotiated subjective understandings (subjectivism). Reality is constructed* (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; p xxxii).

From these authors, we can summarize that Postmodernism offers not one grand, explanatory narrative, but an acceptance of many simultaneous, local narratives to make sense of the world's complexity. Postmodernism also takes us beyond the scientific objectivism of a discovered "truth" and ordered, reducible, and deterministic laws of the universe.

In addition to accepting an indeterminate world filled with multiple truths, postmodernism offers new concepts on knowledge and our ways of knowing. Postmodernism challenges the modernist notions of knowledge as objective and fixed, the knower and knowledge as independent of each other, and language as representing truth and reality. Postmodernism favors the construction of knowledge as social, knowledge as fluid, the knower and knowledge as interdependent, knowledge as relational, and truth as multiple. Knowledge – and language as a vehicle for creating knowledge – are viewed as the products of social discourse (Anderson, 1997).

This more current worldview is described by Gergen (2001) as moving away from the centrality of individual knowledge, the world as objectively given, and language as truth-bearing. Instead, postmodernism moves our focus from individual reason to communal rhetoric, our explanations from an objective to a socially constructed world, and our language from truthful picture to pragmatic practice.

These authors point to a shift in worldview: a new set of stories and metaphors evolving to help explain what is true, what is known, and the nature of reality as we experience it today. Petzinger (1999) offers his thoughts on that shift as:

> The mechanical world of Newton, Galileo, and Descartes has shifted to the more quantum and organic world of complexity theorists. The central metaphor has shifted from machines and clocks to organisms and ecologies; a period of jazz more than classical music.

Other authors describe the shift in their own terms. Jeff Conklin (2001) states that we are moving from the Age of Science to the Age of Design. He goes on to say that the job of humanity is now shifting from understanding our world (using language to *describe*) to being conscious about designing it (using language to *create*). We are in the midst of a transition from one epoch to another. In the fading epoch, organizations rewarded individuals for predicting and controlling their environment. Individuals worked separately, using a linear process, to gather facts and provide the right answer. Now, the problem-solving process is social and collaborative. Instead of basing decisions solely on facts, we also base them on stories as a way of providing a coherent sense of meaning.

Compared with prior eras, Postmodernism can be conceived of as many shifts: from a single truth to many narratives of truths, from discovered reality to constructed reality, from knowledge as fixed and knowable to knowledge as fluid and situated in language, from classical rigidity to jazz improvisation, and from the laws of science to collaborative stories of design. These shifts in worldview have implications on business organizations and on the framing of leadership as well. The next section of this chapter presents the

changes in environmental forces accompanying the postmodern era, and then Chapter 3 will present the parallel evolution of theories of leadership.

Contemporary Challenges for Business Organizations

Traditional businesses were born of the Industrial Age, and many of them maintain elements from the "man as machine" mindset of that era in their conceptualization of work and leadership. The more traditional business schools, with a quantitative, deterministic approach to markets and economics, treat the workplace as a clockwork to be optimized. For some businesses, there has been no higher purpose for the organization than the progress of the organization itself; profit has become the singular focus of the business.

> The story of the 20th century is one of qualities taking their place alongside quantities, relationships taking their place with objects, ambiguity taking its place with order. Except in business. Business slept through every minute of the postmodern awakening. Leaders skilled at control became the leaders of modernity (Petzinger, 1999).

In the age of science, the job of science was to describe the universe, so we could begin to harness, control, and transform the natural world. As businesses leveraged those scientific methods for describing and predicting the world, they too were able to create control and transformation of the world -- for their own purposes. With these methods, facts legitimized decisions, and the goal of problem solving was to use these facts to decide the "best" solution. Unfortunately, what was legitimized as best for some was seldom best for all, and greed frequently displaced sustainability. "Whenever thinking is governed only by Machine Age concepts such as control, predictability, standardization, and speed to scale, we risk creating institutions at disharmony with the larger world of living systems. We must move beyond the idea that organizations are machines, that only material things and numbers are real, that we manage only through measurement, and that technology is always the best solution" (Wheatley 2009). This is especially the

case as business enterprises continue to grow and have greater impact on the world's economy, climate, and communities.

During the past 50 years, we have witnessed dramatic evolutionary growth in large, global institutions. According to Peter Senge (2005) in his book *Presence*,

> *The size and power of these organizations is having profound impact on our world – significantly shaping technology innovation, political decisions, economic development, demographic and social trends, and even environmental quality. Historically, no individual, tribe, or nation could alter the global climate, destroy thousands of species, or shift the chemical balance of the atmosphere, yet that is exactly what is happening today as our individual actions are mediated and magnified through the growing network of global institutions* (p. 8).

Consider the size of some of today's large global enterprises: as of 2013, Forbes magazine names 63 companies that top their list of largest global firms. This handful of institutions account for $38 trillion in revenues, $2.43 trillion in profits, $159 trillion in assets, and $39 trillion in market value. These firms also employ 87 million people worldwide (DeCarlo, 2013). The revenue from some of these individual firms would rival the GDP of nations as large as Norway, Thailand, and New Zealand. Needless to say, leadership of these organizations has dramatic impact on the world.

Dee Hock, the former CEO of VISA, one of the world's largest enterprises, states:

> *The Industrial Age, hierarchical, command-and-control institutions that, over the past 400 years, have grown to dominate our commercial, political, and social lives are increasingly irrelevant in the face of exploding diversity and complexity of society worldwide* (Hock, 1999; p. 5).

Summarizing these statements, we now have business enterprises, many formed during the industrial age culture, which have expanded to the economic size of small countries.

If they continue with machine-like efficiency to optimize for only their own purposes, they ignore the sustainability impact on broader communities. As in the quote above, there are an exploding number of contextual issues to be considered.

One term frequently used to describe the contextual environment of the new global organization is VUCA, an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. The term was coined in the late 1990s by the military, and has been subsequently used in a wide range of situations, including business. Johansen (2007) defines VUCA as:

- **V**olatility: The nature and dynamics of change, and the nature and speed of change forces and change catalysts.
- **U**ncertainty: The lack of predictability, the potential for surprise, and the sense of awareness and understanding of issues and events.
- **C**omplexity: The multiplex of forces, the confounding of issues, and the chaos and confusion that surround an organization.
- **A**mbiguity: The haziness of reality, the potential for misreads, and the mixed meanings of conditions; confusion between what is cause and what is effect.

These elements present the context in which today's global organizations operate. VUCA sets the stage for the conditions under which contemporary leaders make decisions, plan, manage risks, foster change, and solve problems.

Building further on VUCA, Robert Horn (2001) refers to the issues of our contemporary world as "social messes." He describes these issues as more than just illogical and complex; they are also ambiguous and contain considerable uncertainty even as to what the conditions are, let alone what the appropriate actions might be. Social messes are tightly interconnected economically, socially, politically, and technologically. Because of their distributed social nature, they are perceived differently from various points of view, and contain many value conflicts. These problems of such complex interdependencies in

social settings are also sometimes referred to as "wicked problems" because of their resistance to resolution and change (Conklin, 2005),

VUCA, social messes, and wicked problems are terms that help describe the emerging conditions of the 21st Century. A number of authors depict these contemporary challenges in more specific categories, such as globalization, complexity, paradox, increasing diversity of work forces, technology development and data distribution, the rapid pace of change, environmental issues of sustainability, burgeoning innovations, and so on (e.g., Avery, 2004; Bennis, 2007; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris 2008; Hersted & Gergen, 2013; Tetenbaum, 1998; Western, 2008).

As the world becomes more interconnected and interdependent economically and socially, there are a number of increasingly complex challenges facing businesses and their leadership. Global, mobile consumers create demand and supply that is anytime and anywhere. Growth in emerging markets is accelerating, but is not always responsible and sustainable. Digitization is creating an overwhelming proliferation of sophisticated information to manage. Technology is bringing volatility and disruption as it enables competition from non-traditional rivals and drives the speed of change and innovation. Greater distribution and decentralization of knowledge are bringing expectations of immediate and open communication and a demand for transparency. Social and cultural changes increasingly emphasize the need for a more diverse, inclusive, and participative perspective of leadership.

The complexity of these challenges makes the heroic individual leader an untenable model. There is growing recognition that leadership needs to be a capacity present across and throughout an organization to be effective, fostering a greater sense of involvement among the workforce, and generating more innovation and adaptation for the enterprise.

Four Stories: Narratives of Complex Business Challenges in a Postmodern World

The past few pages characterize the global forces impacting contemporary business organizations. With these themes in mind, I interviewed more than 60 leaders across four different industries – Financial Services, Fashion, Food Services, and High Tech – to ask what specific challenges they were encountering in their businesses. Following is an edited transcript of their responses, which serves to correlate and further illustrate the challenges characteristic of our current age.

Story 1: Financial Services

Globalization: *Being global means confronting many new issues; it brings the complexity of aligning offices from many different countries. We operate in a multidimensional environment, where different values, goals, and cultural forces affect actions. There's a need to consider the cross-cultural aspects – working with the styles, cultures, and perspectives of people in so many different countries… and to make people feel valued regardless of their diverse characteristics.*

A global perspective is important for all leaders in the bank. We're international; we're expected to stay on top of all these markets. It's expected that we know how events from anywhere in the world are affecting us, the correlation of one problem to another. "How are the events in Spain today affecting our customer in Brazil?" "How is the oil spill in the Gulf impacting the markets in Italy?" China is affected by the US and Europe; Latin America's trading partner is China. When their economy slows down, Latin America slows down; it's all connected.

Speed of Growth and Change: *Constant, pervasive change is the new normal. Business is going through a tremendous evolution; the economy is changing quickly. The rate of accelerated growth is staggering. Many sectors of the economy are growing very fast at the same time. The markets are in a constant state of moving fast. Leading and managing in this environment of change means we need more strategic thinking related to*

sustaining revenue streams. Twelve years ago, the largest 50 financial organizations were in the $100's of billions in assets. Now, as just one instituion we have $3 trillion on our balance sheet. The rate of change is still increasing, even after my 17 years in this industry.

Technology and Communication: *As technology changes, the decision process changes. Information is distributed so rapidly, it compresses time. Everyone is expected to be available 24/7 – to be always available, never away from work. Telephones and WebEx make travel less necessary; we've gotten better at working in virtual, distributed teams. But we can't get rid of the social aspect, there's still a need for relationships.*

Good communication is important – not just rely on electronics; we need to convey the right message, to align and understand. If we're not aligned, how can we be efficient? Communication at the speed of light can take us in the wrong direction quickly.

I try to get the "right" amount of information: Internet, email, technology -- they make us busier, more efficient, do more work. Technology can also be a distraction; I used to spend a little more time on developing people, but now every day I react to an avalanche of email.

Story 2: The Fashion Industry

Globalization: *Our business has become so much more global, from primarily US to now about 1/3 North America, 1/3 Europe, and 1/3 Asia. It's an instantaneous world – when something happens anywhere, it affects all of us, almost immediately. We've expanded rapidly, trying to meet needs of customers in so many different geographic markets, and also serve global needs and large-scale events such as the Olympics.*

Mostly I feel overwhelmed. You have to rapidly switch your brain back and forth between what is very detailed and what is the high level view, strategic. You have to see the big picture and the small picture simultaneously.

Story 3: The Food Services Industry

Globalization and Complexity: *The expectations of our customers has evolved – they used to be very exact and simple, but now their tastes and demands are so varied across global markets, and their preferences are always changing. We need to go to markets and customers directly, gain solid first-hand insights and rationale for product development. A lot more is expected of us. Good leaders must have depth in their understanding of the business, but they also need to see the big picture and work across the businesses and markets; high level but connected to the details when required.*

Also, because we are rapidly expanding global, any decision has lots of ripple effect; decisions taken in one country affect others. When a business is small, the cost of an error is small. But as we move ahead with this level of global growth, the ripple of a decision can be enormous.

Story 4: High-Tech R&D / Manufacturing

Global Growth and Competition: *Ours is an intensely competitive industry; a breakthrough differentiation lasts only a very short time, then the competitors will catch up – always driving us toward commoditization.*

In the past, success has depended on technology in R&D and efficiency in manufacturing. But now, so many of the forces affecting us are out of our control: economic swings, currency exchange rates. In just the past 5 years we've experienced hyper growth, large acquisitions, and staggering recessions and declines… a real roller coaster. You have to stay diversified and stay adaptable to survive this level of volatility.

The size of our typical customers has grown, from 500 million to 1 billion and now to 5 billion dollar companies. Markets are now much larger. To grow and thrive, we need a much better, more detailed understanding of customers and markets, and yet the future is often ambiguous.

Our investments are larger than ever – meaning the risks are much greater. We need to make ever-larger investments within an environment of uncertainty.

Change and Speed*: There is a strong need for innovation, for always generating new ideas just in order to keep up. But we're not looking for innovation of some small gadget or widget – that's not good enough… we're moving in the direction of large innovations; we need mass scalable innovation. To be innovative, we must be adaptable, to have flexible and fast to respond to the market.*

Speed is so important; our business is about "shoot-aim-ready" – detailed planning and thorough analytics are a rare luxury. Sometimes meetings have no agenda or structure. Innovation is so important, that means not being afraid to act quickly, take risks, do what is required, change and adapt, remain agile. We don't have patience to wait for things to develop, there is too much rapid change that requires adaptability… we cannot be rigid, precise, or systematic. People in the field need the ability to make decisions; they don't have time for decisions to move up and down a reporting chain. In this environment you really have to have speed to keep up, or else we'll lose our business. You can't rely on centralized, corporate decision making – it's just too slow.

Four Stories Reflections

After summarizing the comments from all the interviews, I felt that I had a more context-grounded understanding of how contemporary trends such as globalization, speed of change, technology innovation, and complexity are impacting these organizations and framing the challenges of leadership. Although the specific implications and symptoms present somewhat differently in each industry, overall the challenges remain quite similar and are aligned with the themes mentioned earlier by several authors.

Heifetz (2009) has referred to these as *adaptive* challenges: conditions that require responses that are qualitatively different from past behavior. These adaptive challenges have pushed the requirements of leadership beyond the bounds of individual power and expertise, or an individual's influence and charisma with a small team of followers. The

challenges are too great to be solved by an individual, heroic leader, or even by a small team of experts. Businesses are inextricably embedded in the context of environment and communities. They impact, and are impacted by, this dynamic landscape. As such, I think that leadership must be re-framed in a qualitatively different way; as a collective organizational capacity for working through these adaptive challenges in a manner that is sustainable for the business and its broader systems context.

Summary

This chapter opened by describing shifts in worldview, and the need to evolve our story of leadership from elements of the Enlightenment and Modern eras that are no longer relevant for making sense of our contemporary world. Such a world holds less predictability – it is described as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Business organizations and the communities affected by those organizations are presented with more large-scale, complex challenges than ever before.

Businesses previously thrived on certainty and predictable order: leadership through command and control. But mechanistic and individual views on leadership are insufficient to meet the adaptive challenges and entangled social messes of our more complex world. Individual leaders have been unable to meet our needs for certainty, stability, and security. This time of change brings the possibility to adopt new thinking, new vocabulary, and new ways of constructing leadership.

The characteristics of Postmodernism and the challenges of the contemporary world call for a different construction of leadership. This view of leadership is not individual but collective, as no one leader has the expertise to deal with all the information and complexities relevant to important decisions. For any decision, there are multiple perspectives, each of which may bear significantly on the outcome.

This view of leadership is built not along a single meta-narrative or truth, but one which allows for multi-vocal meaning making – localized narratives of economies, markets, employees, and customers. In this view, truth comes not from an individual leader, but from open and curious dialog.

Beyond dialog, this new concept of leadership engages everyone in participation, coordinating interaction at the collective level. Because changes will be frequent, it is essential that open and collaborative relationships be sustained. To be adaptive, there is a move from emphasis on the fixed to the dynamic, yielding the capacity to shape interactions in real time.

Leadership from this perspective is an active collaborative process, a set of relationships and practices to help groups to make sense of complex and changing conditions, to enable diverse perspectives to work together with a sense of unity, and to encourage adaptive, innovative performance.

These characteristics of a new construction of leadership are those lent by the shifting worldviews of postmodernism and the dynamic conditions of the contemporary world. In Chapter 2, I will present an additional lens for framing leadership, building on the ones here with the language and concepts of systems theory.

Chapter 2: Systems and Complexity

Introduction

The previous chapter explored evolving worldviews, highlighting shifts in thinking that occurred from the period of the Enlightenment to the Postmodern age. These shifts paved the way for a more holistic, systems-based view to arise in the second half of the 20th century. The early portion of this chapter will explore some of the definitions and tenets of general systems, and then the special case of complex adaptive systems. The later portion of the chapter presents these same concepts as metaphors for viewing leadership from a systemic, relational perspective.

I begin with an introduction of three important tenets of general systems thinking. These are: taking a holistic perspective, attending to connections and relationships, and including context.

<u>Systems thinking is a shift to holistic perspective:</u> The shift toward a systems-oriented perspective began in the scientific community, first with new paradigms in quantum theory and then more broadly in biology, industry, computing, and social theory. The biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced the idea of general systems theory as early as the 1920's and then in 1968 published his book *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications*. His theory emphasized a holistic, process-oriented model of the universe in which all parts are mutually affecting. This point of view stood in contrast to the previous era's linear, mechanistic model of the universe as an assemblage of unrelated entities with discrete cause and effect, and marked the shift toward systems thinking that continues to grow today.

Another author also speaks to the evolution of thought toward systems and an understanding of the totality:

> *A scientific generation patterns its models upon its dominant metaphors. Scientific figures of speech in the 19th century concerned linear effects rather than field*

forces …. The 20th century characteristically has drawn its metaphors from Einstein's relativistic field theory…Field theory, Gestalt theory, and systems theory, in spite of their differences, all recognize that the interrelationships among co-acting components of an organized whole are of fundamental importance in understanding a totality (Paul Meadows, 1957, as quoted in Miller, 1978).

Meadows' quote echoes the same shifts in worldviews that were discussed in Chapter 1, namely the movement from a mechanistic, reductionist emphasis on parts to a stronger emphasis on the systemic relationships of the whole. Systems thinking requires a holistic perspective, because the whole often has properties and behaviors that cannot be explained in terms of its individual parts.

<u>Systems thinking attends to connections and relationships</u>: Systems thinking attends to the *connections* between things, events, people, and ideas as much as to the things themselves. Systems thinking recognizes that it is often these interrelationships, the patterns of connection, that give meaning to the system as a whole.   Author Timothy Brook, in his book *Vermeer's Hat,* illustrates this set of connections in an interesting systems metaphor:

> *Buddhism uses an image to describe the interconnectedness of all phenomena; it is called Indra's Net. When Indra fashioned the world, she made it as a web, and at every knot in the web is tied a pearl. Everything that exists, or has ever existed, every idea that can be thought about… is a pearl in Indra's net. Not only is every pearl tied to every other pearl by virtue of the web on which they hang, but on the surface of every pearl is reflected every other jewel on the net. Everything that exists in Indra's web implies all else that exists.* (Brook, 2008)

According to systems theory, everything is fundamentally interrelated, and input into one aspect of a system will affect other aspects of that system, which in turn affect other aspects and so on. By paying attention to this web of relationships, we can observe patterns of connections that give rise to even larger wholes. System performance

depends on interactions rather than just actions; how the parts fit and work together, not merely on how well each performs independently.

<u>Systems thinking includes context and environment:</u> Systems thinking can be described as *contextual* thinking, considering things in their context and relation to their environment. A system's performance depends on how it relates to its environment and to other systems. Relative to their interaction with the environment, systems can be described as open or closed. A closed system is tightly bounded, doesn't exchange any matter with its surroundings, and isn't subject to forces originating outside the system. By contrast, an open system allows interactions between internal elements and the environment; it is a "system in exchange of matter with its environment, presenting import and export, building-up and breaking-down of its material components" (Bertalanffy, 1984; p. 4). Because of their relationship with the broader environment, open systems (most often seen as *living* systems) cannot be explained in simple terms of cause-effect between their elements.

Systems Thinking for Organizations

As I began to consider a new way of framing leadership in business organizations, one which would have the capacity to take on 21st century challenges, I turned to these tenets of systems thinking. In a world that is more connected than ever, a holistic perspective is useful. We can no longer optimize for only the function we head, the product we advocate, or the geographic region we represent. There are influences from and implications on the whole system bound up in every decision we make: all parts are mutually affecting. This is a shift in thinking, from that of being a leader of a function, a product, or a geography, to one in which we contribute to the holistic leadership capacity of an organizational system.

Inherent in this holistic view is the emphasis on connections and relationships, rather than only on the entities, the interactions as much as the actions. Supply chains come to mind as an example. The performance of any one supplier, transporter, or distribution

center is important only in the way it efficiently interacts with the other elements to create an entire logistics system. The relational interplay of supply and demand must be carefully balanced, and the system can be realistically evaluated only through the interactions that create the whole.

The systems tenet of including context and environment also holds implications for organizations. A business enterprise does not exist in bounded isolation -- its internal processes are continually impacted by shifts in economies, regulations, consumer trends, technology breakthroughs, and employee demographics, to name a few. Most recently, we are acutely aware of the negative impact on our global climate when organizations do not include consideration of the environment in their actions.

As our worldview continues to shift toward one that takes a more systems level perspective, it is my hope that business organizations will also adopt this perspective and begin to frame leadership in a more systemic, relational way.

Complexity and Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS)

Complex adaptive systems (CAS) exist as a particular subset of complex systems. They are *complex* in that they are diverse and made up of many interconnected elements, and *adaptive* in that they have the capacity to change and learn from experience. Lewin (1999) wrote "complex adaptive systems arise when a community of agents interact and mutually affect one another, and in so doing generate novel, emergent behavior for the system as a whole" (p. 198).

Paul Cilliers (1998) goes on to explain other important characteristics of complex systems. For instance, they are constituted of a large number of elements interacting richly, locally, and non-linearly, containing feedback loops and being far from equilibrium.

Building on what these two authors offer, I will continue that a complex adaptive system is comprised of heterogeneous agents, each having different and evolving decision rules. These agents interact with one another and with their environment, forming relationships

that grow stronger or weaker with feedback over time, and their interactions create a dynamic, self-organizing set of patterns. This set of emergent patterns has properties and characteristics of its own, distinct from those of the underlying agents. In summary, one could say that a CAS includes *networks of interacting, interdependent agents who are bonded in a unified cooperative by a common goal, and dynamically evolve over time toward that goal.*

In the earlier paragraphs, I described the general tenets of systems thinking, and began to connect these to the framing of leadership. The definitions of a CAS provide even more specific and applicable terminology, adding that these systems can be dynamic, self-organizing, and adaptive. For me, this metaphor works well in imagining how a business team might interact in a way that would be effective in meeting complex challenges, and thus be said to have the emergent systems property of leadership. Following the metaphor, this team would include a number of diverse, independent members; it would not impose a hierarchy, choosing instead to continually self-organize; the team would build relationships through interaction, and the interaction would provide feedback that modified the relationships over time; and finally, although the team would be bound in cooperation toward their agreed goal, it would continually adapt its means and ends as it progressed. When organizations are faced with new and first time situations, when those situations are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, there are no pre-existing and certain solutions. Using the CAS metaphor, teams could create the conditions for continual learning and adaptation as they are in process, which could also be framed as the emergence of leadership at the system level.

Properties of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS)

This chapter so far has presented some general tenets on systems thinking, as well as an overview of the special type of system known as a complex adaptive system, or CAS. In this section, I will elaborate on some of the properties of a CAS, thereby providing language to use when later framing leadership from this perspective. When authors describe Complex Adaptive Systems (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Cilliers, 1998; Kauffman, 1996;

Pascale, 1999; Rouse, 2000; Schneider & Somers, 2006; Stacey, 2001; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw 2000) they generally include the following characteristics:

Collective: A CAS is comprised of a large number of diverse elements, or heterogeneous agents. These agents interact with each other, constructing and reconstructing schemata (assumptions, expectations, values, habits) and decision rules that organize their relations. These agents continually come together to understand the world and each other; to agree shared meaning, create shared direction, and to sustain their relations. The behavior of each agent affects the behavior of the whole. Their act of responding to and interpreting what they experience involves constructing, reconstructing, and modifying their collective schemata—their way of making meaning. Although the system contains a large number of elements, its properties are not reducible to those of the individual elements; these discrete parts are highly differentiated, but bound into collective, coordinated unity.

Interconnected; Interdependent: Complex adaptive systems highlight the importance of relationships, since systems properties emerge via the dynamic, non-linear interaction of their elements. The behavior of the elements and their effects on the whole are interdependent. These systems cannot be reduced to or understood in terms of straightforward causal inputs and outputs. They "change their own operations through operating" (Davis & Simmt, 2003, p.139) and thus resist direct, external control or accurate prediction, which sets them apart from the traditional analytics of machines.

Any element in the system influences and is influenced by quite a few others. These interactions need not be physical, and could be thought of as dialog and communication. These small interactions can result in large-scale changes to the system. As the agents interact locally, adapt to each other, and generate variety and complexity in their schemata, they construct coherent patterns: rituals, structured relationships and organizations, communication systems, commonly held criteria for meaning-making and decisions. These patterns in turn contribute to a sense of shared purpose. Each time the agents solve problems, they self-organize with new patterns and introduce variety into

the system. The system is most creative in this mode of ongoing adaptation, and will wind down unless replenished by the energy of changes in internal and external patterns of relationship.

Dynamic, Self-Organizing: Theorists define systems as complex and adaptive when they are in a state "far from equilibrium" (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) and "at the edge of chaos" (Kauffman 1993). They are poised between the poles of stagnation and decay at one extreme, and unpredictable, chaotic dynamics at the other. They thrive at the boundary regions near the edge of chaos, where the more static components of order begin to melt and the agents in the system co-evolve to optimize themselves in the changing environment (Kaufmann, 1993).

Though the patterns of self-organization cannot be predicted, some systems contain an *attractor*, which represents the tendency to move toward patterns of a given form or value. So, on the one hand, the evolution of systems moves toward greater complexity, novelty, and diversity, yet on the other hand it maintains its unified identity

Open Systems: Complex systems are open systems; they interact with and adapt to their specific environment because they are interwoven with it. Energy and information exchange across the system's boundary. As the environment shifts, so does the system's patterns of structure. To understand a complex system and its adaptations, then, one must take into account its particular history and environmental context.

The concept of *structural coupling* refers to the relationship between the system and the environment as a result of the system's history. Environmental events can disturb and trigger internal processes in a system, but which processes are triggered (and whether any processes are triggered at all) are determined by the structures of the system. For example, long term adaptation with our environment has enabled human eyes to develop the structures that detect movement in our environment, while a frog's eyes do not. Thus, our vision will be triggered by movement because we are structurally coupled to that environmental stimulus, whereas a frog will not respond to that same stimulus (Lettvin, et.al., 1968).

German sociologist Niklas Luhman wrote prolifically about systems, especially with application to social systems. Luhman notes that an open system operates by selecting only a limited amount of all the information available outside. The criterion for which information to select and process is *meaning* – in other words, the system determines what information from the environment holds meaning. This discrimination and selection process gives rise to the system's unique identity (Luhman, 2006). As a result of the elements and their relationships both inside the system and with the environment, each system is unique in its behavior -- the way that it selects input, processes that input, and produces output.

Unlike inanimate objects, which generally follow established patterns of physics, living systems interact with their environment and have the freedom to determine what has meaning: what they respond to, and how they respond. An example of this principle is provided here:

> *When you kick a stone, it will react to the kick according to a linear chain of cause and effect. Its behavior can be calculated by applying the basic laws of Newtonian mechanics. When you kick a dog, the situation is quite different. The dog will respond with structural changes according to its own nature and (nonlinear) pattern of organization. The resulting behavior is generally unpredictable* (Capra, 2002, p. 35).

Adaptive and Emergent: In every interaction, the agents within a system enact patterns—their previously formed schemata—with slight or major variations. With each perturbance, the agents are able to choose to reconstruct historical patterns that continue to serve the system's purpose, or to construct new patterns when adaptations are called for. Thus, the system is resilient: durable and consistent with established patterns, while remaining flexible and open to learning in order to evolve. When a system does evolve, its changes are not deterministic along lines of cause and effect. Adaptation is non-reversible, and produces a system with new properties as a whole. One

cannot manage and control a complex adaptive system, but only attempt to nurture the emergence of beneficial coherence (Cavanagh 2006).

I have summarized my paraphrased characteristics of CAS in the following table:

Table 2-1: Attributes of a Complex Adaptive System, or CAS

COLLECTIVE	Many diverse heterogeneous elements; yet viewed as an integral whole (non-reducible)
INTERCONNECTED INTERDEPENDENT	Multiple rich connections, networks of relationship between these elements a. Relationships are non-linear, non-local (power law) b. Feedback mechanisms exist (history, memory) c. Connectivity has plasticity; interactions are strengthened or weakened over time
DYNAMIC	Behavior seems unpredictable, but follows an underlying pattern that evolves (non-deterministic) a. Agency; co-evolution b. Self-organizing, no central control; developed by the system itself (autopoiesis) c. Attractors; Tipping-Points
OPEN	Interacts with the environment across its boundary to exchange matter and energy (dissipative) a. Structural coupling b. Tension; non-equilibrium; edge of chaos c. Embedded in context; extends outward and upward to other systems
ADAPTS	Emergent: when perturbed, adapts to a higher level of novelty and complexity a. Whole system develops unique properties not found within the elements b. Emergence is non-reversible; no cause-effect

Implications for Organizational Leadership

The most common realizations of complex adaptive systems are living systems, such as organisms or organizations. Examples from the literature suggest that business organizations share some of the traits and behaviors associated with CAS. Similar to systems, organizations are composed of a range of diverse agents who interact with and mutually affect one another, and in so doing generate novel behavior for the organizational system as a whole (Marion, 1999; Regine & Lewin, 2000). Furthermore, organizations, like other systems, self-organize by continuously generating new structures and patterns through the ongoing interactions of the people within the system in a process of emergence (Olson & Eoyang, 2001; Waldrop, 1992)*.*

These authors borrow language from complex adaptive systems to apply to organizations, and I would like to add my own paraphrased version**: *organizational systems are a collective of diverse, independent participants; the participants are interconnected and interdependent in their relationships; their patterns of interaction are dynamic and self-organizing; they interact with their environment across boundaries; and they adapt toward novel and more complex forms that best suit their shared purpose*.** Following on, here are my reflections that continue to frame organizational leadership from the systems perspective.

Diversity: A system leverages its diversity, recognizing that more diverse elements lead to more permutations of possible adaptations. Framing leadership from a systems perspective also leverages diversity as an enabler of more possibilities. The main participants in the organizational system, employees, are indeed growing in their level of diversity. By 2050, minorities will make up 55% of the US working-age population (US Census Bureau, 2008). For organizations operating globally, the scope of diversity is even larger -- spanning all the countries in which they operate. With such levels of diversity, no individual leader can understand and represent so many perspectives and worldviews. The implication in re-framing organizational leadership is that it must create the space for

dialog and multiple voices, with the capacity for holding diverse views simultaneously rather than insisting on a single view of what is right and true.

Independent participants, interconnected, interdependent, and self-organizing: Considering the systems perspective of independent agents is interesting if we think how it might apply to employees. Each organization will have in place certain rules, policies, procedures, hierarchical structures, and other various degrees of management control, but ultimately, employees act out of independent free will. The degree of free will afforded to an employee is one of the key variables that has been changing since the machine age era. In that earlier worldview, employees were simply parts within the production machine, and operated under strict authority with little free will. However, in more contemporary organizations, employees operate under less authoritarian control, and have a large range of freedom in choosing what work to do, where to do the work, and how to do the work (Hirschhorn, 1997). The implication in re-framing leadership is that leadership is less about imposing authority, structures, and controls, and more about contributing to the naturally occurring attractors and self-organization that occurs in systems. Leadership becomes the willing participation in shared purpose, collective direction, and coordinated interaction.

Interaction with context: Also like a system, an organization cannot be fully understood without considering the environment in which it operates – the broad context of economies, social demographics, communities, market dynamics, and government regulations, to name but a few. Instead of being discrete entities, an organization and its environment co-create their relationship, their interaction, and the resulting outcomes. Why do organizations thrive in some markets, and yet not in others? It is neither the organization nor the market which create the outcome, but rather their interaction amidst all the other contextual elements involved. As a global business executive, I cannot understand the issues in France by sitting in my New York office; I am too far removed from the context and the people who are doing the meaning making. To understand their meaning, I must participate in the meaning-making. The implication

here is that leadership must exist not only *in situ* (in place) but also *in vivo* (in a living organism). Leadership, as knowledge and meaning making, is situated in human action (Capra, 2002; Varela et al., 1991). It is embedded in the context of interactions between people, and of people with their environment.

Adaptation: For complex adaptive systems to survive, they must cultivate variety and adapt. Organizations follow this tenet as well. For example, many project teams do not successfully evolve beyond their initial stages-- they stagnate or dissolve. Some, however, do successfully endure by embracing change and reinventing themselves, adapting in terms of *both means and ends* (Holland, 1995; p. 9). Organizations exist today in an environment that has been described in Chapter 1 as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. It is no surprise, then, that so many of them emphasize the importance of innovation and adaptation to their continued growth (Verweij, et al., 2012).   Because outcomes are unpredictable in a complex environment, leadership is about creating a context within which adaptation can emerge, rather than trying to control and bring about predetermined results, possibly missing opportunities that arise unexpectedly.

A Systems Story

As I reflected on the properties of complex adaptive systems, I considered several teams in which I have participated. The best of those teams, where we were most successful in reaching our goals, included diverse team members. The benefit of this diversity was the multiplicity of perspectives and contributions brought to the whole. However, even with all the diversity, we had a sense of unity – a feeling that our individual differences melted into a collective way of meaning making and shared direction. As we worked together over time, our interactions and dialog influenced one another and also influenced the way we collectively made meaning, leading to new ways of working together, and ways of moving forward.

In the year 2000, I was working on a consulting project for one of Thailand's largest national banks. The issue was both serious and urgent: after a long period of economic growth with strong export trade, rising foreign deposits, and national banks lending (over)generously, Thailand's economy had taken a big downturn. The Thai government undertook a difficult decision to abandon the dollar peg and devalue their currency in an effort to restore exports. In only a few short years, this bank had gone from high growth to near-crisis, reporting as much as 80% of their outstanding loans as non-performing. The World Bank intervened with both assistance and strong mandates on credit policy (e.g., Lai, 2000). To achieve a solution, the issue needed to be viewed from a systems perspective—there were so many interconnected, interdependent, and non-linear relationships among the factors, and the result was indeed a "social mess" with little clear definition of the problem and little understanding of what would be required as a solution.

For our project team, we had assembled more than one hundred members, very diverse in terms of our specialties, our levels of experience, and especially our countries of origin: Thailand, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, India, England, the US… Yet we needed to come together in coordinated action with shared meaning-making and common goals in order to affect progress, even in the face of great complexity and ambiguity. It helped us build a

sense of relationship and community by living in the same building, riding to and from work together, eating meals together, and socializing together; we were bound together in place and purpose, sharing the experience. In the first few weeks we developed processes for exploring the issues, alternating our meetings in sub-teams and then across sub-teams. The smaller groups provided a place for open dialog around flipcharts, often in multiple languages, where agreement on meaning could be reached in pictures, diagrams, and words. Small groups operated without hierarchy or fixed structures, so that dialog emphasized everyone being heard. The cross-team meetings then helped ensure broader understanding and agreement across sub-teams, and looked for systems level interdependencies.

Other than our meeting processes, we imposed little structure and allowed team members to participate when and where they thought they could add the most value. As we gained collective understanding of various problem statements, we began to craft goals and solution paths, with teams performing on those that were clear, exploring and experimenting with those that were less clear.

Continuing to make progress, one key to effective action was the team's willingness to continually adapt. There were ongoing changes in team membership, government regulations, project funding, technology, consumer trends, regional economics, and other factors, so along the way we made our own transitions in goals, success criteria, processes, and the meaning we constructed from it all.

Over the period of a year our team presented ideas, made recommendations, and acted on some very difficult decisions. Later, according to the criteria set by the World Bank, the Thai economy was in a stronger position, as was this particular bank. Whether or not it was partially due to the actions we took is unknown, because such complex systems do not have discrete cause and effect. I was reminded through this experience that we do not direct a system, we only participate in it.

Summary

Systems thinking has grown from the fields of biology, astronomy, and quantum mechanics as we attempt to make sense of the world beyond the limits of Newton's laws and physical domain. Systems principles are aligned with a postmodern worldview: systems thinking is a shift to holistic perspective; systems thinking attends to connections and relationships; and systems thinking includes context and environment.

One particular type of system is a complex adaptive system, which can be said to have these traits: it is a collective of diverse, independent agents that are interconnected and interdependent, with relationships that are dynamic and self-organizing. It is open to and structurally coupled with the environment. As it is perturbed by the changing environment, it adapts and emerges with higher levels of novelty and complexity. The general principles of systems, as well as the traits of complex adaptive systems, provide language and metaphor useful in thinking about organizations. There are many similarities, in that an organization can be conceived of as a living system that needs to adapt to ongoing changes in the environment in order to be sustainable.

I paraphrased these similarities by saying: *Organizational systems are a collective of diverse, independent participants; the participants are interconnected and interdependent in their relationships; their patterns of interaction are dynamic and self-organizing; they interact with their environment across boundaries; and they adapt toward novel and more complex forms that best suit their shared purpose.*

Using the elements of this metaphor as a guide, organizations can consider the implications for reconstructing leadership as they embrace diversity, think of employees as independent participants who are interconnected, interdependent, and self-organizing, as they accept their connection with the context of environment, and as they continually adapt.

With this fundamental overview of systems as one perspective of organizational leadership, I now continue with Chapter 3 and a review of literature related more closely to leadership theory.

Chapter 3: From Leaders to Leadership

Introduction

Chapter 1 highlighted the complex, global challenges facing businesses in our contemporary age and suggested that to meet these challenges, a shift from mechanistic, deterministic models of organizations and leadership to a more emergent, organic, and systemic view is necessary. Chapter 2 continued to develop that view in more detail, and reviewed the key tenets of complex systems as a way of understanding the world and of providing language that can have application in constructing a different meaning for leadership. Chapter 3 now reviews leadership theory and traces changes in perspective over time as they shift from individual focus toward a more systems-oriented and relational view.

Leadership is a difficult concept to define; in fact "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (Bass, 1981; p.7). With so many definitions and theories in the literature, I found it somewhat difficult to select or create a classification scheme to organize my study and literature review. In contrast to the usual chronological approach to theory evolution, some authors provide an overview using other useful means of clustering, such as by level of analysis. These include leadership from the individual level, as dyads of leader-followers, as groups or teams, or as collectives – groups of groups (Yammarino et al., 2005). In his book, *The Deep Blue Sea*, Drath (2001) proposes three categories for considering leadership perspectives: personal dominance, interpersonal influence, and relational dialog, which I will attempt to paraphrase and reflect on in the following paragraphs.

In the first principle, personal dominance, followers rely on the leadership skills and capabilities of the individual leader – they commit to the individual because they believe he/she has the superior qualities (knowledge, skills, experience, birthright) required to lead them. The individual leader's goals and interests are privileged, and the leader

becomes the architect of order and control.   In this principle, however, the collective capacity to face adaptive challenges is constrained to the individual leader's capacity to face such challenges.

In the second principle, interpersonal influence, team direction is approached as a negotiated outcome, with the resolution of differing perspectives and convergence of parts occurring via social influence. Individual participants act on their personal styles and behaviors, attempting to influence others to make sense of the content and context in certain ways. If not already appointed, the leader emerges as the individual with the greatest social influence. In this way, participants interact and some degree of transformation is possible, but since this approach is largely about aggregated convergence (the term *herding cats* comes to mind), the capacity to face unresolvable differences and yet continue moving forward still limits the group.

In the third principle, relational dialog, the group embraces differences, and comprises ambiguity, uncertainty, and multiple meanings -- moving away from the prior principle's reliance on convergence. In this principle, leadership is the property of a social system. Individuals do not possess leadership; leadership happens when people participate in collaborative forms of thought and action. This understanding of leadership can allow collectives to accomplish work across differing perspectives, values, beliefs, cultures, and worldviews. Embracing these differences, they can more readily face adaptive challenges and commit to shared creation of a yet-unknown future (Drath, 2001).

In a somewhat similar manner, I found it fit for my purpose to broadly categorize the writing on leadership into three clusters:

1) the individual-level perspective: theories that focus on leadership as belonging to an individual leader, emphasizing traits, competencies, dominance, and interpersonal influence;

2) the group-level perspective: distributed and shared leadership within groups; theories that focus on leadership as simultaneously existing in the characteristics or actions of multiple individuals associated with a group; and

3) the systemic-level perspective: theories that view leadership not as an individual, nor as a series or simple aggregate of discrete actions among multiple individuals, but as the collective processes, practices, and emergent properties of a system.

In this chapter, I will review highlights from the literature in each of those clusters, showing how the concept of leadership is evolving from one that highlights a few exceptional or influential individuals (leaders) to one that emphasizes the collective processes of the group and the complex network of relationships between people (leadership).

Most of the research on leadership has stressed individual leader traits, styles, and competencies (who I am and what I do). Despite contributing significantly to the definition of requirements for being a leader, these approaches unduly privilege rationality, control, and dominance. They spring from a time when leadership was seen as "being in charge" -- the ability to direct, command, and control others (Townley, 2002). Individual -based theories are limited in providing insights for solving the global, systemic challenges facing complex and rapidly changing contemporary organizations.

Most theories of leadership remain stuck in an industrial model -- products of top-down, bureaucratic paradigms that dominated the twentieth century. They are individualistic, rational, linear, and technocratic, eminently effective for an economy premised on physical production.   These models are not well-suited for a more knowledge-oriented economy, nor do they accurately reflect current postindustrial values such as collaboration, global concern, diversity and pluralism, critical dialogue, qualitative methodologies, and consensus-oriented processes (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2010; Rost, 1993; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvy, 2007).

In the review that follows, I will describe how these traditional definitions and theories of leadership are beginning to evolve toward systems-oriented models such as complexity and relational leadership theory, offering broader possibilities for interaction and efficacy.

Leadership As The Individual Leader

Classical research on leadership began at the individual level of analysis, with a search for attributes that differentiated leaders from non-leaders and explained their effectiveness (Galton & Eysenck, 1869). Early approaches, known as the 'great man' or heroic theories, gave primary attention to people's personality traits (Stogdill, 1950), presupposing that only a select few could become leaders. Effectively, leadership was a quality resident within an individual. Eventually, however, these studies concluded that the idea of leadership could not be isolated in a particular set of inherited traits.

Subsequent studies proposed that not only one's demographics and personality traits, but also certain learned skills and abilities, and could predict leadership effectiveness in organizations (e.g., Judge, Colbert, & Ilies, 2004; Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007). These learned skills and abilities became known as competencies, or "the underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job" (Boyatzis, 1982; p. 21).

Models of leadership competencies proliferated, attempting to define what was most closely related to superior performance in the job of a leader. However, given the broad span of a leader's role, it was difficult to create a set of competencies that applied to every type of follower and situation.

As the number of individual leadership theories and competency models proliferated, George et. al. (2007) attempted to synthesize them, examining more than 4,000 studies from the previous 50 years of research. This tremendous review revealed that a number of individual-level dispositions, motives, skills, and experiences have indeed proven important to capable leadership in many situations, and yet no definitive individual leader profile resulted. Further, Bolden and Gosling (2006) offered that competencies "breed

conformity to a standardized, generic leadership model, without considering what gives leadership its vitality, life, originality, and distinctiveness" (p. 147).

I have spent over 15 years of my career applying various trait and competency models to assess, hire, coach, and develop thousands of professional leaders. While a rigorous, customized competency model can be useful as a foundation for assessing a candidate's fit to a specific functional role, there is no effective competency model for an overall, generic "*leader*," because no such role exists across organizations.

However, many professional firms do market their general leadership competency frameworks, with accompanying test instruments, research and benchmarks as validation. The competencies listed in these frameworks are somewhat similar, and refer to skills such as financial analysis, planning, setting direction, strategic thinking, motivating others, and driving results. Based on my experience in several large talent development firms, competencies can generally be grouped into four areas: thought leadership, results leadership, people leadership, and self leadership. In application, I often found this high-level grouping useful in describing the skills required of leaders, rather than attempting to list each specific competency. However, I began to wonder how I might transform these individual leader competency clusters into similar clusters of collective practices, more representative of the systemic leadership capacity within a group or an enterprise.

The theories described so far focus on the traits and competencies of an individual leader. Other researchers, however, began to focus on the interactions of leaders with followers, including two authors who describe these types of relationships as transactional and transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass & Avolio, 1964). In this terminology, *transactional* leadership is linked to traditional management practices of command-and-control efficiency, and is defined by an interest in goals, rules, and maintenance of the status quo (March & Weissinger-Baylon, 1986; Bass, 1990). The well-executed practices of transactional leadership aspire to the greatest efficiency of result attainment. However, these practices seem more appropriate to a mechanistic view of the workforce,

as they yield the rational, objective components of results and compliance, but not the more humanistic elements associated with engaged followers who are willing to commit discretionary effort.

By contrast, a transformational approach ties leader effectiveness to a richer, deeper interaction between leader and follower by focusing on vision, values, motivation, and pursuit of a shared higher purpose (Bass, 1990). A transformational leader is inspirational, authentic, motivational, and human-relations oriented. He or she does not need position or power to transform others, and instead creates followership through interpersonal connections and social influence. This style is purported to yield not only basic performance, but also trust, respect, and admiration of the leader (Bass, 1985; 1990; Burns, 1978).

In my early days of corporate training, when these terms were still new, we spoke of "transactional" as being associated with management, and getting things done, whereas "transformational" was more associated with leadership and inspiration, motivating action toward change during times of uncertainty. Both approaches had merit, and yet it seemed that each was more appropriate in different situations.

Around this same time, other authors began to consider that selecting only one style of leadership interaction would not suit every situation and set of followers. As a result, Hersey and Blanchard (1977) offered an approach to leadership interaction that is situational, focusing on the contingency of follower maturity as an indicator of what style of relationship the leader should enact, and they encourage leaders to alter their style of interaction to best suit each situation. With contingency and situational theories, leaders were asked not to master just one style, but in fact several styles in order to increase their ability to adapt to different situations.

Although these approaches move beyond the traits and competencies of individuals to emphasize the relationship with followers, they continue to focus primarily on the individual leader: the leader's skills and flexibility in exerting interpersonal influence on followers, and a direct cause-effect approach between leader action and follower

performance. However, as businesses began to experience more complex challenges, including the need to respond more quickly to global market conditions, they found that individual leaders did not have "sufficient and relevant information to make highly effective decisions in a fast-changing and complex world" (Pearce and Conger, 2003; p. 2). Further, the differing expectations and specialized expertise of knowledge workers in the post-industrial era contributed to the need for a more democratic, shared type of leadership as opposed to the vertical, dyadic relationship between followers and an individual leader (Fletcher and Kaufer, 2003; Seers et al, 2003; Pearce and Manz, 2005; Carson, Tesluk and Marrone, 2007). The concept of leadership needed to move beyond the scope of the individual leader.

Distributed and Shared Leadership in Groups

As organizations grew and increased in complexity, and as teams of employees began to expand in scale, scope, and geographic location, some authors began to suggest that it is not sufficient to rely on only one person's interpersonal influence or agency to provide leadership (e.g. Drath, 2001; Wheatly, 2009). Challenged to adapt quickly to unpredictable global markets, organizations began experimenting with more organic networks and structures, inventing several new forms of working groups and collectives such as cross-functional teams, six sigma teams, matrix and dotted line reporting, alliances and networks, project management offices, quality review boards, and various global virtual teams.

These new structures did not usually contain the simple leader-follower dyads, nor was success so frequently attributable to an all-knowing, heroic individual leader. Therefore, research studies began to place less emphasis on the properties of an individual, and more on the interactive and interdependent *processes* of leadership -- a call to move from the "who" and "where" of leaders to the "how" and "what" of leadership (Grint, 2005). Variously referred to as collective, shared, or distributed leadership, these models, reviewed and cited over the next several pages, emphasize the importance of participation, democratic involvement, and collective decision making, and make a claim for a less formal or hierarchical model of leadership.

I can well remember when the concept of a quality team was new, and was introduced to the manufacturing site where I worked. Small teams of employees responsible for the assembly of sub-units were asked to consider and recommend improvements to the work process, since they were closest to it. These peer groups were empowered to take what had previously been fixed engineering drawings and manufacturing instructions, and to collaboratively edit them in the moment without asking for permission or approval from a chain of hierarchy. Tentative at first, they tried out their sense of agency, and over time built comfort with acting as a self-managed team. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I was witnessing a real shift in the concept of leadership-- from the individual to the team.

Shared Leadership

In research literature, the terms shared leadership, collective leadership, and distributed leadership are used somewhat interchangeably. However, definitions for shared leadership most often include the word *team*, as the research around this topic originated predominantly in the team-based literature. From that writing, shared leadership is defined as

> *a team process where leadership is carried out by the team as a whole, rather than solely by a single designated individual. Vertical leadership is dependent upon the wisdom of an individual leader whereas shared leadership draws from the knowledge of a collective. Further, vertical leadership takes place through a top-down influence process, whereas shared leadership flows through a collaborative process (Ensley, Hmielski and Pearce, 2006; p. 220).*

Another definition of shared leadership from Pearce and Conger (2003) reads "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" (p. 1). They go on to say that leadership is considered shared when it is exists broadly throughout a group or team rather than being localized in any one individual who serves in the role of manager (Pearce & Conger 2003).   As described by Cox, Pearce, & Perry (2003), shared leadership relies on an exchange of lateral influence among peers. These definitions imply that the source of influence in a group can originate from more than just one person acting in a leader role, and is more than simply doling out tasks while the leader maintains control. The idea here is that team members exert interactive influence on one another and on the team as a whole.

Beyond its appearance within the evolving self-managed team structures of businesses, shared leadership also became a more common occurrence in public institutions such as schools, churches, and healthcare systems. Shared leadership is popular where teams seek a sense of collaboration, collegiality, community, and mutual responsibility for both the team's outcomes and the way they work together. I encountered shared leadership

over the years in many parts of my work and personal life. Several of the small community and church teams where I participated functioned with shared leadership: we had no structure; all members were equal without hierarchy. The issues and desired outcomes were not complex, and neither were our processes of interaction. We simply collaborated, openly debated issues and viewpoints, and reached consensus-based decisions, all without an appointed leader.

Distributed Leadership

Closely related to shared leadership is the concept of distributed leadership, which also represents a shift in the focus from the heroic efforts of an individual in the leader role to leadership defined through the group-level interactions and processes of its members.

Distributed leadership, for Spillane (2005) has a pragmatic focus on leadership as a practice and focuses on the organization (in his writing, the organization is the school) as the unit of analysis, rather than the team. "From a distributed perspective, leadership involves mortals as well as heroes. It involves the many and not just the few. It is about leadership practice, not simply roles and positions. And leadership practice is about interactions, not just the actions of heroes" (Spillane, 2006). This theoretical stance highlights several important points. First, that leadership is a function of the entire group and not a privileged person or role. Also, that leadership is interaction – a process of doing and acting, yet not acting alone; inter-acting, moving forward in collective, coordinated action.

In many ways, this description of distributed leadership seems similar to shared leadership. However, the concept of distributed leadership goes beyond acknowledging that multiple individuals are involved in leadership practice, and highlights that leadership includes collaborative meaning-making, inclusive of the situational context in which leadership is enacted. Spillane (2006) offers that elements of the situational context are considered to reflexively define and be defined through the practice of leadership. As teams engage with tasks, context is not merely the stage on which they act, but also

actively constitutes their sensemaking and leadership practices. Spillane et al. (2001) go on to state that knowledge is situated in activity and bound to the social, cultural and physical contexts rather than separate from them; what is known is co-determined by the agents and their context. This approach begins to move distributed leadership into the domain of distributed cognition, emphasizing how knowledge and cognition are held in the space between individuals and the situation (Hutchins, 1995).

Most theories assume that knowledge and learning reside within the individual – the individual is the learner, knowledge is "out there," and the learner must internalize the knowledge. However, with the view of distributed and situated cognition, knowledge is constructed as learners collectively make sense of their experiences (e.g. Brown & Collins, 1989; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Smith & Semin, 2007).

Gronn's (2002) writing distinguishes between two different kinds of distributed leadership. The first is a numeric or additive view in which distributed leadership is the sum of its parts: the aggregate of attributed influence in a group of individuals in which any member can exercise leadership. For me, this is merely an emphasis on the aggregation of parts, and does little to describe a more collective perspective. The second of Gronn's definitions describes distributed leadership as "concertive action." Distributed leadership construed as concertive action suggests a holistic view in which leadership is demonstrated through the synergies achieved in joint action. This second definition is quite different from the view of aggregated, individual acts, and represents a more cohesive, collective perspective.

Yet other approaches to distributed leadership take a functionalist form: there are certain tasks to be accomplished that, although usually done by a single leader, can be distributed or divided out among multiple group members. This view raises the possibility that anyone who fulfills critical group functions is exhibiting leadership (McGrath, 1962; Hackman & Wageman, 2007).   Morgeson et al., (2010) presented a comprehensive paper titled *Leadership in Teams: A Functional Approach to Understanding Leadership Structures*

and Processes. The authors listed a number of actions attributed to team leadership and critical to goal accomplishment. These include monitoring team and team member performance, managing team boundaries, challenging the team status quo, contributing ideas to improve how the team performs its work, solving relationship oriented problems in the team, obtaining and allocating resources to the team, and supporting the team's social climate. The authors went on to point out that the leadership role is "to do or get done whatever is not being adequately handled for group needs*"* (McGrath 1962; p. 5), Finally, the article conceptualized team leadership as "the process of team need satisfaction in the service of enhancing team effectiveness" (p. 8), recognizing that beyond the formal leader, multiple individuals are often capable of satisfying team needs, and that team leadership can come from multiple sources simultaneously.

Another author (Barry, 1991) proposes that that the tasks normally associated with leadership can be split apart, shared, or rotated in "boss-less" teams. He groups these tasks in the four categories of envisioning, organizing, spanning, and social. The view advanced by these authors is that leadership should focus on how and to what extent these functions are performed more than who performs them: in other words, the *what* of leadership more than the *who*. Although this view moves beyond a single privileged leader, it continues to be non-integrated, and positions leadership as an aggregate of tasks, activities, and individuals.

Agile development teams have gained popularity recently, especially in the software engineering industry, and represent one form of distributed leadership. As one of the 12 principles behind the Agile Manifesto (Beck, 2001), self-organizing teams are at the heart of the Agile development process. Self-organizing teams manage their own work, and organize around the details of the tasks. Leadership in Agile teams is distributed, providing subtle control and direction to the team, in contrast to centralized management in traditional teams. Roles such as Scrum Masters and Coaches are seen facilitators, and do not directly organize the team (Hoda, Noble, & Marshall, 2012).

Long before the introduction of Agile processes, I frequently consulted at the team level because these shared or distributed models of task responsibility fit well with my own perspective on creating greater leadership capacity in organizations. However, I began to notice that in spite of the efforts to create a unified identity within teams, the participants and their relationships were still treated as entities, and that static structures often kept participants in place, restricting their full contribution. Most teams advocated specific roles, structures, charters of responsibility, work breakdown structures, and team "best practices" to be followed. Rather than being a flexible, agile, and adaptive solution, it seemed that these teams were recreating the same constraints of the enterprise from which they were carved.   Although team theories were purported to be collective, they did not meet my hope for describing the fully integrated and transcendent properties that emerge from a complex system. I continued to read and search for a set of theories that would reflect collective leadership more in systems language and metaphor.

Systems and Relational Theories of Leadership

Chapter 1 traced an evolution of worldviews to the contemporary era, concluding with a postmodern view on the complex challenges that businesses now face. This chapter so far has traced a different evolution of thought, concerning the construct of leadership: from individual, heroic leader to more distributed forms in teams. However, the challenges from Chapter 1 suggest that further evolution of the paradigms surrounding leadership is in order. As my reading and research continued, I wondered what might be more relevant ways of articulating leadership for a contemporary world.

In their seminal article *Leadership Déjà vu All Over Again*, I discovered the following Hunt and Dodge (2000) quote from Margaret Wheatley:

> *Here is a very partial list of new metaphors to describe leaders: gardeners, midwives, stewards, servants, missionaries, facilitators, conveners… Although each takes a slightly different approach, they all name a new posture for leaders, a stance that relies on new relationships with their networks of employees, stakeholders, and communities. No one can hope to lead any organization by standing outside or ignoring the web of relationships through which all work is accomplished* (p. 165).

These metaphors were appealing to me, as they described some of the postures on leaders I was seeing in my professional work with key clients—leaders not in the more traditional command and control roles, but assuming new ways of interacting with their organizations. I continued my review of academic literature to discover what others were writing about this shift in stance on leadership.

One researcher that I resonated with offered that leadership is "misplaced" in most writing: it is not located in a designated individual, nor the mind of followers who recognize that person as leader, nor any discrete set of relationships that structurally map one person to another; it is instead in an "undefined middle" (Wood, 2005). My reviews of current literature and research suggested that indeed the leader-centered and leader-

follower models of leadership are giving way to perspectives that attend instead to that "undefined middle" -- the space between leader and follower (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000), highlighting the relational process of leadership rather than the person or position (e.g. Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Hunt & Dodge, 2000; Jackson & Parry, 2011; Uhl-Bien 2006).

When we begin to re-frame leadership as processes rather than a person, the interactions and relationships become the prime focus of attention. In these more recent views, there is a shift in the way of seeing: from the leader-follower to the "reciprocal relationship" of leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, et.al., 2007); from individual to distributed forms of leadership (Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2007); and from leaders as actors to the communicative and relational processes associated with the emergence of leadership as a collective property (e.g. Drath, et al, 2008; Fairhurst, 2007; Gronn, 2000; Hosking, 1988; Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

Complex Systems Leadership Theory

Based on my prior studies in biological, engineering, and business systems, I continued to search for theories that presented a systems view of leadership. Research from other fields had recently delivered new insights on complexity science, and I had been inspired by Margaret Wheatley's (1999) book *Leadership and the New Science.* As I continued to read the academic literature, I found more applications of complexity science to leadership.

Complexity theory, as discussed in Chapter 2, explores the nature of interaction and adaptation in complex systems, including such elements as emergence, innovation, and fitness. Applying the language and concepts of complexity theory to the study of leadership has led to a view known as complexity leadership theory. According to Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvy (2007; p. 298) "Complexity science suggests a different paradigm for leadership—one that frames leadership as a complex interactive dynamic from which adaptive outcomes (e.g., learning, innovation, and adaptability) emerge." Based on this framework, leadership is viewed as an interactive system of dynamic, unpredictable agents who interact with each other in complex feedback networks, which then produce systems-level outcomes such as learning, innovation, and adaptation to change.

The complexity approach is different from traditional leadership concepts in that it defines leadership as a property of the whole system rather than seeing leadership as situated in any individual or discreet relationship within the group. It is assumed to be a system function that enables individuals to engage, via a sense of unified identity, in collective action; to be interactive and interdependent with one another and with the environmental context; and to employ learning, innovation, and adaptation to both process and outcomes. It is a function that changes the rules of interaction among people -- their processes and practices -- adapting both where the system is going and how to get there. Whereas in traditional leadership theory, the unit of analysis is most often the individual leader, the leader-follower dyad, or the various leaders within a group, in

complexity leadership the fundamental unit of analysis is the complex adaptive system (Goldstein, Hazy & Lichtenstein, 2010; Hazy, Goldstein, & Lichtenstein, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

I began to relate the concept of complexity leadership to what I had observed in my practice with groups in development programs. Similar to the tenets of complex systems already described, groups included diverse participants, each as free agents. They interacted with one another without being given specific rules or structures, but developed their own way of providing feedback that continually shaped their relationships and interactions. They were usually given a context-embedded "wicked" problem to work with, reflecting the uncertainty and complexity of the contemporary environment. The problem required them to proceed in spite of uncertainty and ambiguity, continually clarifying their goals and adapting their processes along the way. This challenge required them to learn and create meaning in the process of action, continually applying their sensemaking to the adaptation of processes and outcomes. For me, my group interactions seemed to make application of the constructs Uhl-Bien and others were describing, and I began to frame elements of the LEAD program (as described in Chapter 4) in this language and metaphor.

Earlier I presented that complex adaptive systems continually evolve, and that they evolve in non-deterministic ways. When a system –such as a business organization -- has the collective property of leadership as defined above, then those who are within the system are continually adapting it toward fitness with the changing environment. With this perspective, Marion and Uhl-Bien (2001) offer the new notion that leaders *enable* organizational fitness, rather than *guide* it, by fostering and building networks. Leadership is then enacted through this network – as a form of distributed intelligence and situated cognition that enables the organization to adapt to unspecified future states, allows for the emergence of innovation, and provides for coordinated action. This complexity view aligns with the newer metaphors for leaders from the opening of this chapter – not those

who command and control the organization toward some predictable, determined state, but those who act as gardeners, hosts, and guides.

Relational Leadership

Relational leadership is embedded in social constructionist epistemology, and brings much of the constructionist perspective to the application of leadership. It is important to note that the term *relational* is a stance, a way of seeing leadership rather than a specific style or way of *doing* leadership.   As a different way of seeing leadership, relational theory moves us well beyond individual leaders.

The construct of an individual leader is rooted in assumptions of the individual as being a separate and distinct entity, and having a number of distinct possessions such as expert knowledge, skills, experiences, interests, and goals, to name a few. Teams and groups, then, are merely aggregates of these individual entities and their possessions (Dachler & Enderle, 1989; Hosking, 1988). This form of possessive individualism carries with it the Cartesian dualism of external realities, separate from the mind of the knowing person. This leads further toward constructing knowledge as something which is "out there" with a set of properties which can be objectively known when the contents of the individual's mind correspond with or mirror the surrounding world (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1993; von Glasersfeld, 1985).

The constructionist relational stance is very different regarding the concepts of individual and knowledge. *Relational* is a way of viewing the world as intersubjective and emerging through our relationships with others. This view brings to the forefront and gives primacy to relationship. First, we are in relationship -- we exist in mutual relationship with others and our surroundings. Relationships are constituted in dialog and interaction. We both shape, and are shaped by, our social experience in everyday interactions and conversations (Berger and Luckman, 1967; Gergen, 1999).

According to Fairhurst and Grant (2010), the social constructionist approach to leadership commonly exhibits two interrelated characteristics. First, it avoids a leader-centric

approach in which the individual leader's personality, style, and behavior are the primary determining influences on follower actions. Second, it gives emphasis to leadership as a co-constructed property arising from the processes, dialog, and interactions among the actors.   In the next few paragraphs, I will highlight a few of the key principles fundamental to this way of seeing and describing leadership.

Primacy of relationships, not individuals

Ken Gergen (2009), in his book, *Relational Being*, explains the overall concept of a relational view – giving primacy to relationship, and offering self only as a construction that takes place within that sea of relationships. From his relational stance, he goes on to speak of leading:

> *In my view, we may usefully replace the concept of leadership with that of relational leading. While leadership denotes the characteristic of an individual, relational leading refers to the ability of persons in relationship to move with engagement and efficacy into the future (p. 333).*

This quote reinforces the idea of de-centering the individual leader and setting the stage for leadership as a collective property.   In this sense, leadership is not something that one person possesses, as much as it is something achieved in community and owned by the group (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Foldy et al, 2008). A relational view recognizes leadership not as a trait or behavior of an individual leader, but as a phenomenon generated in the interactions among people acting in context (Hosking & Morley, 1988). In other words, leadership is not seen as a possession brought to the community by an aggregate of individuals, but rather a property that is *generated* in that context through interaction. Leadership happens when people participate in collaborative forms of thought and action, and everyone in the social system participates in that process.

I think that the term *community* provides a good description of both the relationships within this collective as well as their style of interaction. Adapted from Merriam-Webster's (2012) dictionary, the noun *community* or a *commune* can be defined as*: a close-knit group of people who have a feeling of fellowship with others as a result of*

sharing common attitudes, interests, goals, and responsibilities. Referencing the verb form, to *commune* is: *to be in intimate communication or rapport, to converse or talk together with profound intensity, intimacy; to interchange thoughts or feelings*.   For me, both the noun and the verb form help describe the group where leadership is ripe to unfold: the community is close-knit, in fellowship around shared purpose and goals, and they hold intense dialog to exchange thoughts and arrive at meaning.

Relationality is a concept of community where individuals and collectives constitute one another, a field of relationships where self and others are inseparable. This type of collective is more than just an aggregate of individuals. Collective knowledge and action do not reduce to the sum of individual knowledge and actions; relationships and individuals are mutually constitutive. Individuals do not only enter into relationships, but are also brought into being by those relationships" (Drath et al., 2008; p. 641). While my approach aligns with this integrated, field view of constructionist relationality, others conceive of relational leadership in different ways.

Because the theory is somewhat nascent, authors have offered a range of views on relational leadership. Some maintain the more traditional roles of leaders and followers, defining relational leadership as a pattern of reciprocal interrelating between workers and managers to make sense of the situation, to determine what is to be done and how to do it (Gittell & Douglass, 2012). A recent study quotes that "Leaders and followers live in a relational world in which leadership is co-created in systems of interconnected relationships and richly interactive contexts" (IBM Global CEO Study, 2010).   Although self-defined as having a relational view, these two framings, at least for me, simply acknowledge the importance of relationships in a traditional paradigm of leaders and followers, and do little to shift that paradigm.   This positioning sounds much like the transformational approaches to leading presented earlier in this chapter, maintaining the role hierarchy yet emphasizing the quality of the relationship and its reciprocal impact on both leader and follower.

For my purposes, I prefer the constructionist approach, viewing leadership as emerging from the rich relationships and interactions within a community. Several authors (e.g. Chia and Holt, 2006; Hosking, 2011; Raelin, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006) forward that perspective by saying that relational leadership shifts emphasis away from the core premise of methodological individualism and seeking explanations in terms of individual intentions and motivations; it instead stresses the primacy of relations and practices over the individual or organization. Stated simply, the relationship comes first, and from there spring the processes of collective, coordinated inter-action.

<u>Knowledge as socially constructed and socially distributed</u>
Just as the constructionist relational stance shifts our focus away from the individual as a separate entity, it also shifts the locus of knowledge. With this new centering on relationships, knowledge is no longer accumulated and stored in the containers of individual minds. Instead, we view knowledge as distributed across the web of relationships and interactions of a community. Relational leadership does not locate 'knowing' within the mind of an individual. Knowledge emerges within a process of relating, and knowing is an ongoing process of meaning-making (Dachler & Hosking, 1995).

The authors' statement above highlights the *active* property of relating and knowing – there are processes in which we engage to relate and to construct what we know. There is a powerful implication here: since knowledge is constructed through the interaction between human beings, and since meaning and reality are created in interpersonal dialog, then participants can shift their knowledge, meaning, and their reality by shifting their interaction and dialog.

Relational leadership focuses not on the makers of the process, but on the processes made within the current undertaking (Hosking, 2000). Leadership is constituted within conversations of the community, and with these conversations the widely distributed fragments of perspectives, cultures, and worldviews coalesce into an agreed mosaic of

meaning. What is known in the community is constructed within the dialog, narratives, and stories of that community.

Jeff Conklin (2009; p 17) writes:

> *In the emerging paradigm, something new is happening. In place of prediction and control, we seem to have nothing but chaos; in place of individual efforts, the problem-solving process is now clearly social; in place of basing decisions on facts, we base them on stories that give us more coherent sense of meaning. In place of finding the 'right' answer, we seek to gain a shared understanding of possible solutions.*

I like this summary, as it emphasizes how the more complex challenges of the contemporary world shift our need toward more complex social processes. Conklin also highlights the word *stories*, evoking the image of community members in dialog to agree on narratives of meaning. The following section pursues this dialogic process in more detail.

Relating as a processes, dialog, and interaction

A summary of earlier paragraphs is that relational leadership gives attention not only to relationships, but also to the processes that help to define and constitute such relationships, as well as their embeddedness in a broader system. (Hosking, 2007; Drath, 2001; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006).   Here I want to further discuss those processes within a group: the coordinated actions whereby participants collectively create meaning and standardize practices that will lead them toward their agreed goals.

As the community process of meaning-making unfolds, the *knowing* and the *meaning* are distributed and embedded within the context. Meaning is constructed in mutual relationship of the actors and the context. For example, holding up a certain pattern of fingers on one hand may have the meaning of *call me on the phone* between actors in one context, or *bring six drinks* between actors in another context. The meaning is not objective – it is not contained in the fingers themselves, in the actions of actor, nor in the

reaction of the receiver. Instead, the meaning is negotiated within the interaction of the actor and receiver and the current context.

A constructionist perspective sees the meaning of leadership as socially constructed -- a negotiated understanding that arises within the context of collective action. From this view, the meaning of leadership emerges through the relational, interactive work of the group, and not from the traits or contributions of specific individuals.   A relational approach to leadership shifts our focus from what it is that we do as individuals to what it is that we make together. Leadership becomes something we perform together, in relationship with each other, rather than an act that one individual does alone or to another. Leadership becomes a dynamic, fluid process during which we make meaning of our current situation together and move forward in coordinated action. This happens when community engages in dialogue and meaning making to collaborate across different perspectives, values, beliefs, cultures, and worldviews (Hersted & Gergen, 2013).

Robert Quinn (2004) posited that in order to participate in a more relational process of leadership, we must open up with others in order to become co-creators of a new possibility, a new reality. By making that choice, we commit to doing something collaboratively, coordinating our actions with others. That choice demands that we let go of our individual sense of control and along with others "build the bridge as we walk on it" (p. 9).

I especially like this image of "building the bridge as we walk on it" for closing this chapter. For me, taking a relational stance on leadership does seem like crossing over to a new perspective: looking at leadership from the other side. And yet, as I continue to study and learn, I am acutely aware that I am still building my bridge toward that perspective. At times I am uncertain of the way, and I wrestle with the language to articulate it. Yet I am willing to let go, to take the journey and become a co-creator of new possibilities. The next few chapters of this dissertation describe how I undertook a research project toward that endeavor.

Summary

As I reflect on the many theories and perspectives just discussed, I am reminded of the parable of three blind men and an elephant. Our concept of the leadership elephant depends very much on which part we experience. No wonder Bass's (1981) quote at the opening of this chapter holds so true: "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (p. 7). Traditionalists say that leadership resides in the unique, superior qualities of the individual leader. Team literature attempts to stretch leadership across the group, sharing and distributing it as tasks and influence among the members. Complex systems and relational theory bring more holistic, collective perspectives on leadership as social properties beyond individual leaders.

In conclusion, then, I would like to paraphrase a number of authors and offer my position on leadership as: *a community process of meaning making, which unfolds as the group pursues shared goals and faces adaptive challenges* (adapted from Drath, 2001; Drath et al., 2008; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Ospina & Foldy, 2010). In terms of further elaboration:

Leadership is constructed in community: it is a collective process, something co-created and performed together, not an individual possession or act.

Leadership is a process: it occurs in action as the collective dynamically shapes the way it relates, participates, collaborates, and dynamically interacts.

Leadership is meaning making: knowledge is distributed in the relationships, and knowing emerges through the process of action – of dialog and collaboration. Meaning is constructed by weaving together the diversity of voices, perspectives, worldviews, and context represented.

Leadership unfolds over time, during the pursuit of shared goals: the community is drawn together in patterns of interaction by strong attractors of shared purpose and goals. Over time, the processes and patterns of interaction involved in pursuit of these goals become the shared practices of the community.

Leadership is a capacity for facing adaptive challenges: the complexity of the challenges faced calls for the community, as a system, to continually adapt its relationships and processes. With this, novel system-level properties can emerge that are best fit for these new levels of complexity.

Unlike the theories associated with traditional individual leadership or group-level distributed influence, relational leadership theory provides a perspective where the maximum capacity for adaptive possibilities exists -- where diversity is embraced as enabling more of those possibilities, and where ongoing adaptation actualizes those possibilities.

At a more personal level, the generative aspects of constructionist-relational theory support my desire for participating in a new worldview where we move beyond the determinism of science and create more conversations of possibilities. The quote below, by Kauffman (2008), provides an artful summary of my hope:

"I will propose a worldview beyond reductionism, in which we are members of a universe of ceaseless creativity in which life, agency, meaning, value, consciousness, and the full richness of human action have emerged. A central implication of this new worldview is that we are co-creators of a universe, biosphere, and culture of endlessly novel creativity."

Chapter 4: Design of the LEAD Program

While earlier chapters provided reviews of current research, this chapter is practice based – it will present the design and implementation of a development program targeting high-potential leaders in commercial organizations. This program, known as LEAD, allows participants to practice addressing the complex business leadership challenges posed by the contemporary world. The LEAD program provides the stimulus and space for participants to explore new forms of dynamic and collective interaction, a crucible for relational practices and the construction of leadership. In this chapter, I highlight the program's format, objectives, and applications with specific clients in the industries of banking, fashion design, consumer food products, and high tech. I also present the theoretical rationale and development tenets behind the program design.

Client Challenges, Wicked Problems and Social Messes

As presented in Chapter 1, contemporary organizations face a host of challenges related to current world trends, including globalization, competition, change, and complexity, among others.

Examples of these challenges, as recently presented to us by our clients, are:

- A US regional bank, after merging with an Asian parent bank to become global, grows and expands significantly through both organic means and several acquisitions. As a result, the bank requires a much deeper bench of ready leaders who can make cross-functional and horizontal moves, lead integration efforts, and think globally on strategic initiatives.
- A US-headquartered fashion design company decides on significant global expansion, and at the same time shifts its strategy from licensed retailers to owned stores to help ensure consistency and quality in brand. As a result, this company needs more leaders, including those who can work more globally and meet the challenges posed by each geographic region.

- A North American consumer goods manufacturer decides on global expansion, entering new markets with significantly different consumer tastes and where the current brand and range of products has no traction. As a result, they need country-level GM leaders with broad business expertise and international experience to lead innovation and growth in these emerging markets.

- A global high-tech manufacturer experiences rapid growth led by market demand, but understands that such demands have cycles. They have exhausted additional growth that could be attributed to technical product enhancements. Now, they need leaders who can innovate not only technically, but in business process and consumer preferences in order to meet the current demand surge and to grow into market adjacencies.

These are major strategic shifts – large scale changes to the core business models – occurring along the path of growth and sustained marketplace relevance. These shifts have a significant impact on people, processes, technology, culture, and finance, and therefore present *messy*, *entangled*, and *wicked* problems (Rittel & Webber 1973; Camillus, 2008).

Russell Ackoff (1974), in his book *Redesigning the Future*, also wrote about complex problems: "Every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems… I choose to call such a system a *mess*."

These wicked problems and messes require new thinking, capabilities, and practices in terms of leaders and leadership. Clients require the development of not only individual leaders, but also of the relational practices of leader*ship* (as described in Chapter 3) to enable operation at the complex adaptive systems level. LEAD is designed to assist leaders in constructing and adopting these relational practices of leadership, enabling them to deal with complexity by working collectively, collaboratively, and relationally.

In their paper *Building Bridges from the Margins*, Sonia Ospina and Erica Foldy (2010) state: "The potential for connectedness is always present in human beings. When

fostered, it can promote reciprocal relations and commitments in groups and organizations that, in turn, generate the collaboration required to achieve collective goals." It was my hope that the LEAD program would foster the level of connectedness, relationships, and collaboration these authors spoke of, so that the organizations involved could benefit.

A Crucible of Individuals, Relationships, and Context

The term *leadership development program* typically conjures images of university lectures, professional conferences, keynote speakers, structured classroom sessions, or even a retreat with team-building activities. But these are not required components, as there are many possibilities for the design of a structured, cohort-based development program.

Most leadership theories, programs, and self-assessment tools attempt to capture a simplified vision of the world and position the leader as a discrete individual who can change situations by applying certain techniques, styles, principles, or character attributes. While these may help, they do not necessarily build the broader cognitive and relational capacity needed to better grapple with contemporary business complexities. While leaders are individuals, the practices of leadership are collectively constructed, the property of a group enmeshed in a web of relationships and in the context of participative experiences. From this view, leadership is found in the work of that group rather than in the traits of specific individuals (Dachler & Hosking, 1995).

A constructionist perspective of leadership defines it as a community process of meaning-making, which unfolds as the group sets direction, creates commitment, and faces adaptive challenges (Drath 2001). Relational practices are the medium in which this collective leadership is socially constructed -- treating self, others, and context as a dynamic, reflexive, connected system. An effective development program, then, must be a crucible to hold the individuals, the collective network of relationships, and the appropriate context as they come together in an emergent system. Because we saw the

challenges of contemporary organizations requiring a new form of connectedness and relationality, our design team approached the program design with this relational stance.

As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a current movement in leadership theory away from an individual focus, and more toward a language of collective, emergent leadership. According to Vaill (1998; p. 25), leadership development can never be a matter of objectivist science because it is a performing art: a dynamic, holistic phenomenon not easily or fruitfully broken into elements and lists of key factors. Vaill suggests that leadership development initiatives must create a safe, supportive environment in which participants can engage "in a process of discovery of the new, the unanticipated, and the unprecedented" rather than being expected to learn "the application of laws to an already-explored territory." That is, for participants to move beyond learning to development, they must be presented with unanticipated and unprecedented challenges that require them to go well beyond the content and actions they already know as individuals. We need to challenge and expand their agility in *knowing what to do when you don't know what to do,* as well as their capacity for the collective, relational, and systemic performance art of leadership in these situations.

Drath (2001) offers his interpretation of what effective leadership development should do:

> *Leadership development in a community or organization is the process of developing the capacity of the whole to make leadership happen for everyone, no matter how any individual person makes senses of leadership… leadership in this view is far from being something that a person can offer independently, simply as an individual, and is seen as a complex construction of multiple levels of meaning* (p. 155).

In other words, the program did not need to teach participants the *definition* of leadership, but to provide an experience where leadership could *happen;* where it could be constructed and defined by the participants within their relations and practices.

Bouwen and Hovelynck (2006; p. 135) proposed that relational leadership development initiates the transition from "a detached or disengaged form of talking to a participatory way of acting." Thus, we wanted participants not simply talking about leadership, but acting on it, constructing and creating it through their actions.

To complete the program's integrated systems view of individuals, collective relations, and context, we considered the role of the organization and broader economic and market environments. One author commented on the lack of contextualization within most leadership development programs: "the hallmark of leadership courses offered on the open market is their complete disregard for the organizational contexts in which their participants operate" (Mole, 2004; p. 125). For this program design, we sought to ensure the actions were embedded in the participants' organizational context and reality.

Many discussions of learning have treated individuals and organizations as separate entities, locating learning in individual minds and/or in organizational structures and systems (e.g. Bouwen & Hosking, 2000; Carlsson, Keene, & Martin, 1991). Author Bruce Avolio (2010) writes:

> *I envision us getting much better balance between learning and application in the near term -- embedding leadership development in context, where we can enhance development as well as performance in parallel. Indeed, if organizations continue to move to being knowledge-based learning centers, then why would we not expect leadership development to occur inside the organization versus outside the organization? (p. 761).*

Authors Edwards, Elliott, White, and Schedlitzki (2013, p 5) offered some very useful insights on alternative approaches to leadership learning and development.

> *Recent studies of leadership development relates back to its experiential nature (Berson et al 2006) and the development of leadership practice from a relational, social, and situated perspective through a process of 'becoming' (Cunliffe, 2009; Kempster and Stewart, 2010). This research has encouraged leadership*

development practices to become more contextually situated and to adopt a
relational perspective (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). In addition, it appears that
leadership development should reconnect with context (Fairhurst, 2009; Jepson,
2009; Liden and Antonakis, 2009).

We agreed that most programs disregard or separate organizational context by offering a fixed, off-the-shelf design meant to fit every situation. As an alternative, we sought to embed the program in the context of the organization's specific challenges, culture, and language, weaving the organization itself into the essential fabric of each program.

With these thoughts and best practices in mind, our team went about designing a program that would address the individual, the collective, and the context, treating these as a non-reducible and integral system. Additionally, with the stance that leadership and learning emerge from the dynamic of participation, we wanted the program to be an action-oriented experience. We agreed that leadership was more than a textbook definition; it was a dynamic social construction of those in a system of active relationship and participation. We also sought to embed the development program within the organizational context, having the activity of development occur within the organization's systems and culture. From there, we began to craft the program structure and modalities in a way that would provide developmental growth by increasing leadership capacity at individual, collective, and organizational levels.

Vertical Development – How to "Complicate" Leaders

In their well-known article *Developing Complicated Understanding in Administrators*, authors Bartunek, Gordon, & Weathersby (1983) develop Weick's (1979) notion of "complicated" understanding by linking it with concepts of complementarity, cognitive complexity, and adult development. The following paragraphs are extracted and paraphrased from their article.

Cognitive Complexity: When Weick offered the advice to managers "complicate yourself!" (1979; p. 261), he meant that managers need to be able to see and

understand organizational and environmental events from several rather than single perspectives. Most people perceive and interpret events from narrow frames of reference. Yet some people have developed greater *cognitive complexity* – they are more capable than others of applying several complementary approaches to the understanding of complex situations. The two primary components of cognitive complexity are

- *differentiation*: the ability to perceive several dimensions, to simultaneously hold valid and make use of several different classification schemes or theories to describe the phenomenon they observe.
- *integration*: the creation of complex connections among the differentiated characteristics, accomplished through a dialectical process in which the various perspectives interact with each other in such a way that a new synthesis is created from them.

Research into adult development indicates that cognitive complexity is integrally related to broader patterns of development. Developmental theory assumes that development is a transformative process based on shifts of perspective. It involves progressive reorganizations of thought structures and frames of reference within which perceptions and events are assigned meaning (Clark & Caffarella, 1999; Kohlberg, 1969).

Appropriate Challenge: The participants' current level of development will affect their responses to the program design and activities (Oja, 1980; Widick & Cowan, 1977). The program structure and the number and diversity of perspectives should be matched with participants' level of development. For example, participants who are less developmentally complex usually require a more structured approach, fewer perspectives, and more authority-centered instruction than do more complex participants. An appropriate developmental match offers a situation slightly more complex and demanding than the participants' comfortable level of response (just outside their comfort zone). It offers a challenge and some stress. Participants initially

may reject such an approach in which case it is possible to offer a more contemporaneous match initially and then move to incorporate more elements of complexity (Miller, 1981).

Ill-Structured Yet Important Problems: The organizational issues addressed within the program must be important and be perceived as important by participants. Issues chosen for projects should be ill-structured problems (Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979) or what Ackoff (1974) termed "messes": highly complex and interdependent problems that have wide impact and involve many people in their solution. The participants must be willing and able to invest a substantial amount of time and energy in exploring alternative perspectives without expectations of immediate results, and to balance performance outcomes with learning outcomes.

Kolb & Fry (1975) as well as Weathersby (1980) suggest ways to create complex learning environments by including a number of techniques: a balance of cognitive content and personal experience; opportunities for participant goal-setting and self-initiated action; a supportive interpersonal climate that allows for risk-taking and self-disclosure; time for personal and group reflection; opportunities for personal comment on events; multiple teaching approaches (such as cases, readings, simulations, exercises, role plays, speakers, action learning projects, discussions, and lectures); multiple observational frameworks; and a design that allows periodic recycling of concepts at successively greater depth. In another article, Hackman and Wageman (2007) propose that peer coaching is the strongest criterion of team effectiveness, and our LEAD design team took note of that as an important program element.

Development is more than acquiring new information: it consists of qualitative changes in the way we know or how we make sense of the world. Professor and author Robert Kegan (1982) speaks about development as two dimensions of movement, one horizontal and the other vertical. Along the horizontal dimension, new ways of thinking and reacting acquired in relation to one set of experiences are transferred to other situations or areas of life. Along the vertical dimension, a series of shifts ushers the individual into a

qualitatively new stage of development with new capacity for differentiation and integration, holding multiple views simultaneously, and viewing situations with expanded perspectives. Vertical development is stimulated through experiences that foster this differentiation and integration of multiple perspectives, triggering changes in cognitive and personal structures that eventually make a substantial difference in the leader's responses (Berger, 2012).

Designing for Vertical Development

With LEAD, we wanted to create a program that offered stimulus toward not only horizontal development, but also vertical development. The program stimulus would take the form of an ill-structured, action-oriented business problem at a level of challenge just outside of participants' comfort zones. As practice session leading up to the action learning project, we decided to include a three-day business simulation. Both the simulation and the longer-term action learning project needed to incorporate the "complicating" dimensions just discussed.

Simulations represent an opportunity to facilitate collaborative learning and interactivity across different parts of functional areas or organizations. As identified by McCauley et al. (2008), a collaborative simulation would allow practice with interdependent leadership behaviors such as engaging in dialogue to explore and manage diverse perspectives, facilitating shared sense-making, co-constructing direction, continually revising approach, and engaging in self-authorized decision-making.

Design Conclusion

Recent research into leadership development (e.g. Burgoyne & Turnbull-James, 2001; Burgoyne et al, 2004; Conger and Benjamin, 1999) indicates that key predictors of impact include opportunities for constructive feedback (assisting self-awareness and reflection), integration with organizational systems and strategy (increasing situational relevance) and facilitation and support from managers both prior to and following the intervention (optimizing opportunities for experimentation and experience).

In her dissertation, *Leadership At All Levels: An Action Learning Approach in Healthcare,* Cynthia Roberts (2009) recommends several theoretical concepts and references that support success in a similar action learning program. First of all, the program should take a comprehensive approach to leadership development that begins at the individual (leader) level and moves to a process that encourages collective, collaborative leadership (Day, 2001; Raelin 2005; Rooke & Torbert, 2005).   It should also challenge current mental models or implicit leadership theories with contemporary notions of collective and relational leadership (Lord & Hall, 2005; Rooke & Torbert, 2005). In practice, the program should incorporate an action learning approach that is experientially-based to provide relevance, encourage reflection, and develop cross-functional relationships that continue beyond the project (Raelin, 2006; Raelin & Coghlan, 2006; Torbert, 1994). And finally, the program should facilitate reflection at individual and group levels (Baker et al., 2002; Raelin, 2001; Rooke & Torbert, 2005; Senge 1990).

Taking together the studies of vertical development and also the practical research findings on leadership development, we concluded on the design elements we wished to include in the LEAD program. The following pages detail how we brought these elements into a semi-structured design that could be further modified and contextualized for each client.

Description of the LEAD Program

To address relevant client business challenges and incorporate best practices, our team designed a three-month development journey, attended in a 24-person cohort, where participants would grapple with real business issues and relationships. The program allows them to learn about leadership while they solve relevant, high-value problems within the context of their organization. In addition to developing individual leaders and an organizational capacity for leadership, the journey also contributes to the organization's strategy execution.

The program is comprised of three, three-day sessions, spanned by an ongoing action learning project, as well as pre- and post-program activities, across approximately three to four calendar months.

Pre-Program Activities

Selection and Kickoff: A selection process allows managers to nominate high-potential candidates to the LEAD program based on the candidate's strong performance in the current role, indicating the skills and capacity to take on more, and the candidate's expressed interest in and motivation for self-development and career advancement. Once the HR / Talent Management team accepts and refines all nominations, the cohort of approximately 24 participants attend an in-person kickoff session that allows them to get acquainted, hear key executive sponsor messages, and review the program objectives and process. Each participant is assigned to and meets one of the three executive coaches who will support the development program (hereafter referred to as the Coach). The kickoff meeting also introduces an individual insight process.

Insight Instruments: The personal insight consists of two instruments: self-response to a personality profile that reports preferences in 30 global leadership dimensions, and participation in a 360-degree multi-rater tool that compares self-perceived ratings on 18-24 leadership competencies against the perceptions and ratings of bosses, peers, direct reports, and others. In dialog with the participant, their Coach will assist them in articulating a narrative of their leadership journey, from past to present to desired future.

The Coach will also assist the participant in making meaning from the report results and correlating results with the participant's narrative. Based on the outcomes of that dialog, the Coach will assist the candidate in drafting goals, intentions, and actions into a written development plan, to be executed during the LEAD journey. The Coach also helps the participant find alignment between their personal goals and the organization's strategy, goals, and success factors.

Development Planning Meeting: Once the initial draft of the development plan is complete, the Coach will facilitate the first of two Development Planning Meetings (DPMs) between the participant, their manager, and their executive sponsor. The purpose of these meetings is to promote open dialog about the participant's objectives, elicit and clarify any insight or feedback messages, and build agreement from all parties on expectations and indicators of program success.

Session Subjects and Activities

Participants gather as a full 24-person cohort for three days during each of the three in-person sessions. Sessions offer a business simulation, content and toolsets, networking, and considerable reflection activities. Individual and group coaching occur both during and between sessions.

Business Simulation: Participants receive a detailed background description of a fictitious business which is experiencing significant challenges, and are asked to develop a strategy in the form of key initiatives to be implemented over the next three years. Although couched in an industry different from their own, the simulated challenges are strongly analogous to the client's own business. The simulated enterprise is made up of three business units, allowing the three teams to work on information, processes, and challenges that are local to their business unit and yet affect the enterprise as a whole. Participants work on the simulation in a number of 90-minute rounds where new information is progressively provided and challenges evolve. Note that the simulation is constructionist in that there is no "correct" or best answer, nor is there a pre-determined outcome. Participants must make meaning of the information given and prioritize and

choose activities in their own structure and at their own pace. Given a fixed budget at enterprise level, they must come to consensus on an overall strategy and set of initiatives that will be recommended.

The recommendation is presented on the final morning to a group of executives from the client organization. These executives will ask questions, challenge assumptions, and explore alternatives in the same way that a set of recommendations or request for funding would normally be discussed within that client organization. Following the presentation, the executives offer feedback to individuals and to the larger group, comparing performance to what would be expected of leaders at the next-higher level in the organization.

The phases in which the simulation is executed mirror the phases that will be used in the action learning project, allowing teams a measure of practice. Whereas the simulation occurs over three days, the project occurs over three months.

Content Knowledge, Tools, and Application: Throughout the in-person sessions, there are content and toolset presentations, approximately 40 minutes each, on the topics most relevant to the client, such as strategy, innovation, systems thinking, collaborative decision-making, influence, and change management. This content and the associated models or tools are generally provided by one or more of the program Coaches, and then supplemented by stories and contextual applications from the client's key executives. Printed resources are developed for each topic and distributed to participants in the form of a workbook for their ongoing reference.

Contracting, Reflection, Feedback, and Coaching: During the first in-person session, the larger cohort is divided into three peer-level working teams of eight people each. In these smaller peer group meetings, participants share insights about themselves and declare "ways of being" they wish to practice and on which they wish to receive feedback. These aspirations may encompass behaviors, practices, roles, skills, or style of interaction. The group will also begin discussions of their desired collective way of being and what they might do to ensure that vision is enabled. The declarations are written into participants'

workbooks, and the peer group members collectively contract to prompt and support one another in those elements of the individual and collective development process.

Throughout session one and the remainder of the program, there are multiple opportunities for participants to reflect and provide feedback both individually and collectively.

Group Reflection and Feedback/After Action Reviews: At the beginning of each business simulation round, groups will hold dialog about their intentions and goals – their desired way of working together and desired outcomes. At the conclusion of each simulation round, they will engage in group reflection, or after-action review, guided by the Coach. From these reviews, they can openly discuss which practices are working well, and which to change in their next activity.

Individual Reflection: Participants spend time in personal reflection, writing their thoughts and feelings about themselves, others, and the group in their learning journal. These reflections may be shared with the Coach, or with the group during feedback.

Real-Time Feedback and Coaching: During each round of the business simulation, participants are encouraged to offer each other real-time feedback and coaching in line with the declarations of the contract. In addition, the Coach will observe individual and group behavior, and may offer feedback or coaching in real time. On the final day of each in-person session, the Coach facilitates a group dialog where each member shares their reflections and feedback about their individual experience, as well as how they experienced the collective group and each of the other participants. Each person offers ideas on how to improve individual and collective performance. Over the three-month program, the Coach will meet with individuals four to six times to assist with application of development to the current job challenges, and to provide additional feedback and coaching.

Executive and Peer Networking: Many opportunities are provided for participants to hold conversations with peers less familiar to them, and to build networks of relationships. In addition, there are numerous lunches, presentations, dinners, and a fireside chats with executives, supporting new or stronger relationships and promoting shared understanding of the executives' behaviors, direction, and viewpoints.

Action Learning Project

The final afternoon of session one includes kickoff of the Action Learning projects, which will span the next three to four months. Participants continue to work in the same three peer groups, leveraging the processes and relationships they have begun to foster. Each group has an executive sponsor, who will present a selected "mess" or wicked problem to their group. The group follows a semi-structured action learning process over the next three months through the phases of problem definition, divergent research and exploration, convergent refinement, and then selection and presentation of recommendations. The Coach will attend several of the group conference call meetings to help facilitate the process and to foster feedback. Importantly, these project teams are encouraged to be "leaderless," without formal roles and hierarchy. Participants are urged to experiment and invent new ways of working together.

Post-Program Activities

Development Planning Meetings: Following the program, the Coach engages individually with participants to reflect on their experiences and the feedback they heard through the course of the program. We revisit the development plan and chart progress made against the initial intentions and objectives. The Coach assists individuals in preparing a brief presentation on their insights, learning, and development progress, as well as an updated development plan for the coming 6-12 months. Then, after several weeks, the coach will facilitate the second Development Planning Meeting (DPM) between the participant, their manager, and their executive sponsor. The purpose of this meeting is to create open dialog on the participant's progress toward the agreed objectives, to elicit any further

observations and feedback messages, and to gain agreement from all parties on next steps toward development and career advancement.

Ongoing Group Activities: Often, as a result of progress and recommendations made in the action learning teams, there is opportunity for the group to continue the project into further stages of approval or implementation. For some groups, there are learning trips to other corporate offices in different geographies/countries, or to those who host very different functions. There are also opportunities to join future LEAD programs as a sponsor, a speaker, or a mentor to new participants.

Chapter 5: Research Design and Methods

Like any other research project, this one involved many decisions to be made: not only the selection of topic, but also which epistemology, which theoretical stance, which research methodology and level of analysis, which methods for data gathering and analysis… the list goes on (Crotty, 1998).

Chapter 3 described the theory that I selected to ground my research: relational leadership. It was not my purpose to define a new metanarrative to cover all of these levels and applications. Rather, I wanted to expand on the existing theory of relational theory by offering a practitioner's view. My intention was to illustrate the theoretical components with real-life observations of how relational leadership unfolded in the practices of action learning groups. Given this theory and intent, my level of analysis was also determined -- the relational collective practices of a group.

My next effort was to consider my underlying epistemology as an observer, and to develop an appropriate research strategy – one which would connect theory to a set of questions and methodology, and would engage participants in the design and outcomes of the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This chapter discusses the research decisions and approaches I undertook for my project.

Systemic-Constructionist Epistemology

My study at the Taos Institute introduced me to social constructionist thought, and I began to leverage those principles toward my research purpose. One tenet of social constructionism proposes that *the terms in which the world is understood are social artefacts, historically situated interchanges among people… they are the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship* (Gergen, 1985; p. 267). Applied here, this view suggests that if many theorists and leaders have actively cooperated to describe leadership as the privileged trait of select individuals, then that definition has become our general way of understanding leadership. Gergen (1985) further states:

forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are
integrally connected with many other activities with which people engage (p. 269). Given
the classically accepted definition of leadership residing in privileged individual leaders,
the resulting social actions have often been those of clockwork-style organizational
structures, or simply of passive followership.

However, if we accept that the meaning we attribute to leadership is a construction, a
negotiated way of understanding, rather than an objective truth, then it is possible to
negotiate another understanding of leadership – one that may be more relevant,
inclusive, collective, and sustainable. This is the trend indicated in the literature review
from Chapters 2 and 3, as new perspectives from science and sociology shift the construct
of leadership within both research and businesses.

Chapter 3 presented the way in which social constructionist perspective is already
embedded in my selected interpretations of relational leadership theory. Adopting this
stance had impact on my research strategy. Social constructionism emphasizes
communication-- the critical role of dialog -- with the belief that language does not mirror
and describe reality, but rather it *constitute*s reality. We exist in language and co-
construct meaning in our conversations, much as dancers co-construct a tango on the
dance floor (Ison, 2010). As a researcher, then, I saw that it would be important in my
strategy to observe and record dialog within the groups in order to understand how they
were making meaning -- how they were constructing their reality of leadership through
dialog.

However, as a constructionist, I also realized that there would be multiple realities in the
groups that I observed, and that I would be providing a subjective interpretation of my
observations rather than reporting on an objective truth. I realized that I was
interdependent with my research participants, an active part of the system, and that my
presence among them as an observer had an impact on what was observed. I abandoned
the notion that I could stand outside of this social system and observe it objectively. In
addition to being labeled as constructionist, this self-reflexive orientation has also been

called cybernetic or *systemic*, drawing on the work of Bateson (1972), Gergen (1985), and others (see McNamee, 1988). Within a systemic epistemology, focus is placed on the process of distinctions that people – including the observer – draw, highlighting the relationships and the worlds they construct (Bateson, 1972; Varela, 1979).

For this research project, I selected a systemic-constructionist epistemology because it fit well with my theoretical perspective, and served my intended purpose of challenging the traditional individualistic ways of defining leadership. This stance also seemed to align with the postmodern worldview I outlined in Chapter 1, rather than the positivist stance of the prior eras. A systemic-constructionist view provided me with the openness to explore new possibilities of what the observer and observed might discover in relationship together.

Unit of Analysis: Collective Practices

In Chapter 3, I organized various theories of leadership in roughly three different categories, corresponding to the levels of analysis presented here. At the first level of analysis, human beings in organizations can be viewed as individuals, independent of one another. In this case, we can focus on a leader or a follower, or how leaders and followers differ from one another. This level can also be viewed as dyads: two individuals who are interdependent on a one-to-one basis. At another level of analysis, human beings in organizations can be viewed as groups or teams, an aggregate of individuals who interact with one another and converge efforts toward a common goal. At a third level of analysis, human beings in organizations can be viewed as collectives. In this case, the focus is on communities who are interdependent based on shared meaning and shared purpose.

For my research project, I selected a perspective where leadership as collective, relational interactions was to be my study. Through the literature review, I found these interactions are best described as "practices." Social theorists contend that practices represent the basic unit of analysis in the social world (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices can be defined as social sites in which temporary clusters of events, people, and meaning compose one

another (Schatzki, 2005). Practices can also be seen as cooperative efforts among participants who choose, through their own rules, to achieve a distinctive outcome (Raelin 2011). In summary, practices represent the routinized, embodied patterns of behavior of humans as they interact with their world.

A practices approach allows us to study leadership as it emerges in the collective work of dialog, interaction, meaning making, and patterns of relational behavior. To find leadership, we must look to the practices within which it is occurring.

A practice-oriented analysis does not take the objectivist stance of explaining from outside the observed system. It is a more pragmatic form of inquiry, aimed at understanding the system from within through active participation in the situation at hand (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Overall, I was greatly informed on the practices approach by the article *Leadership, not leaders: On the study of leadership as practices and interactions,* written by Crevani et al (2010).

> *We must try to redefine leadership in terms of processes and practices organized by people in interaction, and study that interaction without becoming preoccupied with what formal leaders do and think* (p. 78).

Carroll, et al. (2008) point to the need to study leadership as practices rather than only as competencies held by individuals. They offer the following table in helping to make that distinction.

Table 5-1: Contrasting Leadership as a Competency and as a Practice (Carroll, et al., 2008)

Leadership as Competency	Leadership as Practice
Rooted in objectivism	Explicitly constructionist
Individual level of analysis	Inherently relational and collective
Quantifiable and measurable	Discourse, narrative, and rhetoric
Unanchored in relationship and context	Situated and socially defined
Privileges reason	Privileges lived or day-to-day experience

The focus on a relational construction of leadership led me to collect data that illuminated how groups of participants engage in their work, and in meaning making. The concept of practices became helpful in my efforts of gathering, clustering, and framing the indistinct processes of collective inter-action and meaning-making into more discrete themes that could be illustrated and discussed.

Research Strategy

A constructionist lens suggests that leadership happens when a community, over time, develops and uses shared agreements to create results that have collective value (Ospina and Sorenson, 2006). With this lens, the authors go on to summarize the implications for a research strategy:

- a focus on the work of leadership, the collective agreements that facilitate this work, and the practices that embody them
- involvement of those engaged in the work of leadership as co-inquirers rather than subjects of the research, to illuminate the experience from the inside out
- groundedness in a given context with sensitivity to issues of power and its effects on the configuration of relationships that define the context
- inclusion of multiple perspectives, ideally combining several interpretive methods that emphasize narrative.

This choice of lens had clear implications for my research approach. I will expand on the first three bullet points here, then move on to the final point about interpretive methods in the next section. Since leadership is about the relational and collective meaning-making required to produce coordinated action, I needed to focus my attention on these interactive experiences. Once the focus was on those experiences, the method compelled me to invite those engaged in the experiences to become co-inquirers, and reflect on the experiences with me. Therefore, I invited the participants in the leadership program to join with me in co-operative inquiry, as co-researchers through reflection, inquiry, and dialog (Heron & Reason, 2001).

My leadership research was concerned with the processes of leadership rather than with individual leader behaviors. As such, I found it was more productive to ask participants questions about their processes without use of the words "leader" or "leadership," as these tended to trigger their more historically embedded, traditional mindsets in framing a response. In my earliest interviews, I asked questions such as "Given that your team did not have a formal leader, how did leadership occur?" These questions were not yielding very useful responses, and my change to process and practice-oriented questions was very helpful. For example, I instead asked about which relationships or processes got them through a particular difficult situation, how they created direction during uncertainty, what actions or events positively impacted their attitudes and motivation, or what relationships and processes most accelerated overall progress.

The research was grounded in a given context in that all teams were engaged in an active learning project, and the inquiry remained within the bounds of the project. Project participants were peers, and in that context there were no obvious influences of power or hierarchy that imposed on their interaction.

Research Methods

Narrative Inquiry

This study uses interpretive, narrative inquiry techniques (Clandinan & Connelly, 2000; Ospina & Dodge, 2005; Riessman 1993, 2008) to identify leadership practices.

To uncover the relational, shared, and meaning-making aspects of the work of leadership, I created three parallel streams of inquiry: observation/reflection, interviews, and written narratives. These were anchored in the value of dialog with research co-participants as the core activity of the research process. The design purpose was to generate practice-grounded concepts that will be of practical help to participants as they face future challenges, and would help me answer the research question at hand. The overall process of the inquiry is outlined below.

Interviewed for industry context: Interviews with program participants and their senior executives were the primary source of information about the context of contemporary challenges in each organization (presented as Four Stories in Chapter 1). These inquiries consisted of in-depth conversations with the participants and with other members of their organizations held during field visits to each business.

Observed, listened, and noted real-time conversations: In addition to recording written notes from ongoing, real-time team dialog, I also created notes from the specific team reflection dialogs over the three month project team duration. As the observer's voice in the process is also important, I included my own observation notes and reflections.

Interviewed individual participants and groups: the later section on Data Collection provides more details on these interviews. Generally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with individual participants and with groups. With individuals, I met in person and by telephone for one or two interviews over the three month project team duration.

I also organized group interviews, thus including multiple stakeholders in the telling of the interactive experience. By bringing in multiple voices, I could better document the complexity of the situation, as people potentially had different perspectives of the same events.

Collected written narratives from individuals: Near the end of each project, team members responded to a survey with written narratives of their experiences.

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is a research method that operates almost in reverse from traditional social science research. Rather than forming a hypothesis, the first step is gathering data. Within the data collected, key points are identified with a series of *codes* extracted from the text. The codes are grouped into similar *concepts* to make them more workable. From these concepts, *categories* are formed, which serve as the basis for the creation of a *theory*. This method contradicts the traditional model of research, where the researcher chooses a theoretical framework, and only then applies this model to the phenomenon to

be studied. Grounded Theory is not as concerned with data accuracy as descriptive research, since it does not aim to describe a singular "truth." Instead, it is a systematic research method to conceptualize what is going on, generating concepts that are abstract of time, place and people (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Yancey & Turner; 1986).

Reference methodology: The stages of the methodology I employed were adapted from those proposed by Andrews and Scott (2013) and shown below:

1. Collect qualitative and/or quantitative data pertaining to the substantive area.
2. Open code data as it is collected. Open coding and data collection are integrated activities; the data collection and open coding stages thus occur simultaneously and continue until core categories are recognized/selected. A category explains how the main concern is resolved or processed. Axial coding is "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96).
3. Write memos throughout the process that capture the development of theory. Theoretical memos are written about codes and their (potential) relationships with other codes.
4. Conduct selective coding and theoretical sampling. Now that the core categories are recognized. Open coding stops and selective coding (coding only for these categories) begins. Further sampling is directed by the developing theory (who do I need to ask to learn more about these issues?) and used to saturate the selected categories.
5. Read the literature and integrate with your theory.

Methodology in use: My sequence of actions was similar, and proceeded in this way:

1. Data collection. I collected several types of data (see the later portion of this chapter for a more detailed sampling frame and protocol):
   a. My observations and field notes for each group, handwritten into notebooks.

b. Interviews with individual members and group interviews with teams. I tape recorded these interviews and also produced hand-written notes to summarize content. Notes were checked against the recordings for errors.

c. Written narratives from surveys of program participants.

2. Open coding and axial coding. As I reviewed sets of written field notes, interview transcripts, and participant narratives, I created the first level of distinction by separating the data by its relevance to my several research questions. From there, I began to highlight key words as topics that appeared frequently. Initially, there were a large number of these, but as the process progressed, I was able to cluster a wider range of topics into fewer bundles. To do so, I used the highlighting function of my word processing software, and color-coded written data by category. Once an appropriate amount of data was available, I "took apart" the written interviews and narratives, then regrouped them (using cut and paste software functions) by color-coded category. Now, there were clusters of similar responses, roughly organized by category. As I read through these initial clusters, I further refined the categorization, sometimes combining categories or creating new ones and moving responses to keep them appropriately associated. As categories and practice themes emerged, I socialized these with various action learning teams, and checked fitness with their constructions of what was most important and effective.

3. Memo writing. Through this three-year process, I kept two spiral notebooks where I could capture ideas, early theories, and references to other research. These notes totaled about 100 pages. Reviewing these now, I can see the many different potential directions my theories took before landing on a relational practices approach.

4. Selective coding and theoretical sampling. Throughout the interview process, I initially used an interview protocol and more fixed set of questions. However, I later began to modify my interview questions as a way of testing, sampling, revising, and completing certain categories.

5. Literature review and integration. Because I was unsure what direction my theorizing would take, my reading and literature review was quite wide. It ranged across history, myth, sociological theory, psychology, philosophy, and the science of complexity theory, among other topics. Over time, I constrained the reviews to the chapters presented earlier in this dissertation.

Construction of the Study – The LEAD Program

Chapter 4 provides detail about the LEAD program, which provided me the opportunity to observe a number of learning groups in action.

Origin of the Research Questions

The thought stimulus for my research began when I read the American Psychologist special edition on leadership, and found an article titled *Asking the Right Questions About Leadership*, by authors Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman (2007). The opening of the article stated

> *There are no generally accepted definitions of leadership, no dominant paradigms for studying it, and little agreement about the best strategies for developing and exercising it* (p. 43).

I found this an interesting and provocative statement, given my professional role of developing leadership in some of the world's largest business enterprises.

Each week my clients – leaders from the world's largest enterprises – talk with me about the strategic challenges facing their organizations, and their capacity to meet those challenges via talent and processes. They say that to win in their selected marketplaces, their organizations need to develop and adapt faster than these external challenges. I was interested in how to better help them develop and adapt -- not only at the level of individual leaders, but at the level of organizational capacity.

The article went on to surface five key questions inspired by various authors who also contributed to the journal issue, and who suggested some new directions for leadership research:

1. Not do leaders make a difference, but **under what conditions does leadership matter?**
2. Not what are the traits of leaders, but **how do leaders' personal attributes interact with situational properties to shape outcomes?**
3. Not do there exist common dimensions on which all leaders can be arrayed, but **are good and poor leadership qualitatively different phenomena?**
4. Not how do leaders and followers differ, but **can leadership models be re-framed so they treat all systems members as both leaders and followers?**
5. Not what should be taught in leadership courses, but **how can leaders be helped to learn?**

Although these questions were for the most part framed in the traditional stance of individual leaders and leader-follower relationships, they stirred my thinking about how leadership could more broadly be defined, researched, and developed. The last two questions intrigued me most, as I started to think about how we (who are in responsible development roles) might re-frame the concept of leadership to go beyond individual leaders and become more systemic and inclusive; how these collectives of leaders could be more agile and learn from real-time experiences, and contribute even more to organizational adaptation. My clients were already suggesting that contemporary challenges such as globalization require much more than the contributions of heroic individuals, that no single leader could have all the necessary knowledge and skills to make complex, enterprise-level market decisions alone, and that the processes or strategies they use today may not be the best ones for tomorrow. They were already speaking to the need for their businesses to develop a more collective leadership capacity.

About that same time, I also read the book *The Deep Blue Sea*, by Bill Drath (2001), where the author asked the following questions:

> *How do people working together in teams, groups, and communities bring leadership into being; how can their capacity for leadership be increased; is the leader role necessary; is the follower role necessary; are there other roles we have not yet imagined?* (p. xvi)

> *Instead of seeking to develop leadership by developing individual leaders, see how leadership can be developed as a systemic capacity; the capacity of a system to accomplish leadership tasks at various levels of complexity, bringing in increasing numbers of increasingly responsible people* (p. 165).

As I was then working on the design of a leadership development program for several large clients, Drath's questions intrigued me. I wondered how to implement a program that might serve the purposes of both research and client contribution in this process of increasing the systemic capacity for leadership, without traditional leader-follower roles. I wanted to view leadership as the property of a system: the force that creates a sense of unity and collective identity, and supports the coordinated action of the participants.

Other authors also stimulated my curiosity in researching this topic of leadership as a shared or distributed property, such as Jackson and Parry (2011):

> *Virtually all the work on leadership development is conducted at the individual level of analysis. More specifically, it looks at how to increase levels of leadership skills within individual leaders. There is a major need for research into how to develop the processes of sharing leadership, either as co-leadership or in a more distributed form* (p. 120).

My Questions for Inquiry

As I considered all of those questions and challenges, I continued my reading of theory in both systems and leadership domains, and continued to consider the problem statement as was described in the Introduction: how could we re-frame leadership in a way that that

would support greater organizational capacity for facing the complex challenges of the contemporary world? After a wide scan of literature, I selected relational leadership theory as having the most practical fit for my worldview and my application.

I found the theory interesting, but as a consultant responsible for helping to build organizational leadership capacity, I did not find sufficient documentation of praxis to correspond with the theory. My hope was 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 and interactions. The LEAD program became my platform for the study, and so I crafted a research strategy around my key question:

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?

Sampling Frame and Data Collection

Between 2010 and 2013, my job role allowed me to be the lead facilitator (along with two or three other coaches) in several LEAD programs, observing and interacting with 29 action learning teams and over 225 participants. I personally led and coached nine of these teams, including coaching 63 individual members, over the three-to-four month period allotted for each project. This provided me with over 375 hours of individual interactions, and more than 180 hours of group interactions to observe the individuals and the teams in even more detail, and to record those observations in written notes concerning their behaviors, processes, and outcomes.

The following table summarizes the LEAD programs I participated in as lead facilitator between 2010 and 2013.

Client	# of programs	# of project teams	# of participants
Financial Services	5	17	135
Fashion Industry	2	6	45
High-Tech	1	3	24
FMCG/Food Services	1	3	24
Totals	**9**	**29**	**225+**

Participant Interviews

In addition to those personal observations and field notes, I conducted a number of interviews and surveys with participants from various client industries as follows.

Financial Services Client: 44 participant interviews through individual and team-based phone calls; conducted in August 2011 (from three teams) and September 2012 (from three teams).

Technology Client: Six people interviewed from one learning team. Multiple interviews (three) with these same participants over 6 months from December 2011 to July 2012, providing a more longitudinal perspective.

Consumer Food Services Client: Five people interviewed from one team; September 2012

Fashion Industry Client: Five people interviewed from two teams; September 2012

Business Context - Stakeholder Interviews

I conducted face-to-face and telephone interviews with senior executives in these industries to gain a better understanding of their perspectives on the changing context in which leaders are operating, recording these digitally and in written notes.

Financial Services Client: Six senior executive interviews; September 2010

Technology Client: Five senior executive interviews; July 2011

Consumer Food Services Client: Five senior executives interviewed; January 2011

Fashion Industry Client: Three senior executives interviewed; April 2011

Chapter 6:
Emergent Themes & Practices

Introduction

In this chapter, I present my views on the outcomes from the research project. Rather than an *analysis* of the information collected (a breaking down to parts), these views represent *integration* – my own sensemaking of the many observations, interviews, and surveys of action learning teams that took place from 2010 to 2013. Peirce (1903) first described this interleaving of theory and commentary as *abductive reasoning* -- an iterative process of transposing our observations, participants' accounts, and theory in relation to the research questions. As outlined in the previous chapter on Research Methods, I have assimilated participant interview comments into clusters of similar phrases, behaviors, or actions that represent for me their relational leadership practices. Only a few representative comments have been extracted for presentation in this chapter and as illustrations of each theme. Participant quotes are inset from the text, and each paragraph represents a different speaker.

In my written group observations, I take a constructionist stance of leadership as relational practice. This view draws attention not to individual leaders, but instead to leadership as the processes of coordinated action within which participants create meaning and outcomes they value. Further describing these terms, I wish to surface several of my assumptions. First, that I view these groups as an integral system of leaders *and* leadership; self and others inseparably joined in a collective. Second, that I focus on practices -- not only *what* is done, but *how* it is done; leadership as participative, context-situated, coordinated interaction. Lastly, I view these interactions as the dynamic construction of reality -- the medium within which relationships, meaning, outcomes, learning, and ultimately leadership are continuously (re)constructed and adapted. Using parallel language from the world of complex adaptive systems, I view these groups as collective and integral, interconnected and interdependent, dynamic and adaptive.

Research Question:

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?

Summary of Practices

Chapter 5, Research Methods, discussed how data was collected and grouped.   If I were taking a more positivist, empirical stance, I would present here the "objective" data and reserve my interpretation for the final chapter. However, given my constructivist stance, the participants and I were co-researchers, and it is not possible to separate the findings from my interpretations and abductive reasoning integrated with those findings. Therefore, I offer the practices summarized below, as well as the explanatory pages ahead in this chapter, as our joint findings of all co-researchers, supplemented with my further reflections.   The summary of practices is listed as:

- Weaving a web of lateral relationships: letting go of traditional role paradigms; exploring and inventing new networks of relationship to support collaborative interaction.

- Working in service of the whole: accomplishing the tasks and processes traditionally taken on by the leader through new forms of coordinated interaction and distributed responsibility.

- Meaning-making through dialog: building and negotiating shared meaning through open, candid dialog – especially face to face.

- Converging on purpose and direction: prioritizing collective goals to create collective identity; promoting mutual accountability through feedback; balancing performance goals with learning goals.

- Iterating design of the path and the destination: in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty, offering a partial solution (a straw man) the group could continue to modify.

Weaving a Web of Lateral Relationships

Letting go of traditional role paradigms; exploring and inventing new forms of relational and collective interaction.

From my observations, groups initially demonstrated dis-orientation as participants tried to find new ways of relating, interacting, and co-contributing. For them, structure was still a forerunner to process, and yet they had no familiar structure in place. Their paradigm of structure included the traditional "*who* and *where*" workplace roles of leaders as individuals, with leader-follower dyads, and with assigned, independent roles based on the contribution of individual knowledge and expertise. Bereft of these, they did not have a ready replacement structure or a "*how* and *what* of leadership" paradigm as a means of moving forward collectively. Without having selecting an individual as the defined leader, the groups struggled with their initial forming tasks, and it took time for them to build focused direction and momentum toward agreed and aligned action.

> *Initially we sat around, waited. We all wanted to participate, so no one wanted to dominate. We had no formal leader – no one wanted to lead or to be led! Sometimes I felt like 'how can I contribute, I'm just a passenger?'*

> *We had no formal leader; no one rose quickly that the others would support as a leader. Very circumspect to offer ourselves or invite anyone else to. Didn't feel the burden to take it on, my own bandwidth wouldn't allow for it.*

From my coaching work, I have found that in order for participants to make space for new and different thoughts, they must first set aside their current concepts and assumptions – yet this is difficult to do. As illustrated in their quotes, initially they were holding on to the concept of a leader taking charge, someone who stronger or more knowledgeable than others. However, on reflection the participants noted that they viewed each other as equals and held a sense of mutual respect for one another. They were peers, and therefore they felt that no one held any more *right* to lead or offer direction than anyone else -- there were no advantages of seniority, rank, title, or privileged expertise

traditionally associated with a leader. They frequently cited an enabling behavior of "respect for one another," which they clarified as meaning that each person's contribution was given equal weighting. In their desire to remain respectful of this equality, they struggled to define a space from which to contribute that wasn't perceived as self-appointed privilege, or self-promoting into an individual *leader* role. For them, everyone was important by simply being a valued contributor, and there was no one role any more meaningful than another.

> *There was no designated leader; we never talked about appointing a leader. There was a strong collaborative relationship; we didn't need to assign tasks to individuals—people just got involved.*

> *In this program there's no place for a single leader; we're all peers, so it's difficult. Everyone needs a turn to lead. We were a bunch of peers, and knew that leading-following was voluntary, not based on hierarchy or position.*

Gronn (2002) states that once the sacred relationship between top and bottom is allowed to moderate, we become aware of many alternate ways to exhibit leadership — as much spontaneous and intuitive as planned and conscientious. So indeed, as they began to let go of their "sacred" concepts of leaders and followers, they began to experiment with new ways of relating to one another, and to see that new ways of continual self-organizing were possible. As these groups moved into action, they began to experience lateral connections-- a web of collective relationships that was different from the series of dyadic exchanges typical of more traditional leader-follower structures.

Progress in forming this web of relationships was not always smooth, since both the desired endpoint and the means of arriving there were unchartered. The process reminded me of an activity facilitators often use with groups – having the circle of members toss a large ball of yarn from person to person until a visible web of connections emerges. In a similar way, these action learning participants began to self-organize – to interact with one another through conversations, disclosures, inquiries, and interactions, and to build this less visible but still tangible web of relationship.

At times the groups would re-create structures they were more familiar with, or their own tendency to act as an individual command-and-control leader would surface. Since all participants in the program have been leading teams for many years (they are typically in senior director to senior VP roles), individuals found it difficult to *not* be in a position of control or authority, and yet still be accountable for delivering results. It was difficult for them to dispense with their previous paradigms as they tried to invent a new approach to relating and working together. Caught up in the concept of leadership defined within one person or one person's contributions, especially toward organizing and directing, some individuals attempted to take on that type of leadership role. However, in response, members of the group did not necessarily agree to the follower roles.

> *[Name-1] tried to lead us by being very directive --that's his strength. He added lots of structure, but we weren't inspired to follow him. [Name-2] showed up occasionally with inspirational flashes, but wasn't consistent, wasn't there for us… we wanted more from him if we were going to follow.*

At this early stage of the project, there was a typical response I observed in participants who are strong take-charge "leaders" in their job roles. As they attempted to contribute to the peer group in a new way, they went quiet -- initially at a loss for how to interact and add value in any way other than offering direction or control. I tried to coach them toward generating and enacting other enabling behaviors – making other contributions such as encouragement and feedback that would foster collective action.

> *In the beginning I knew I wasn't taking on a specific role of Leader, and I tried not to be in charge. However, in looking for a different way to participate, I initially went too far in the other direction and became quiet, passive… seems as though I disengaged too much. During reflection, I thought about the need to be true to myself. There were times I should've stepped into conversations earlier.   One role I found that I could do was to ensure others were engaged… I encouraged them, asked them questions, invited them into conversations, and gave positive feedback.*

As the groups iteratively attempted to invent new ways of working together that were not based on formal authority and hierarchy, members discovered their sense of agency and realized they could gravitate toward areas of their greatest interest, or toward specific group functional needs as those presented themselves—similar to the self-organizing principle of complex adaptive systems. They discovered that without central control, the structure was not rigid – taking on a role or function for a time didn't mean that they had to fulfill that role for the entire project.

> *There was shared responsibility, no one took over; everybody could speak. We all got something out of this. People gravitated to what they wanted to do. There was no leader appointed, like we have at work. There was no control factor; you just had to 'emerge' if you wanted to lead.*

As they attempted to go on as a "leaderless" group, at times individual opinions varied about whether that structure was effective, or if it would be better to create a more traditional leader-follower structure -- having one person to make decisions and set direction for the group. This discussion helped surface for participants their expectations of a "leader" as well as their expectations of themselves as group members. When I observed the groups, they usually reached a conflict in opinions about structure – a point when they often became uncomfortable, and expressed a wish for an individual leader to resolve that conflict for them, or to provide the social influence that would move the group in a given (and sometimes difficult) direction.

> *We still need someone who is driven to get others agreed and moving in a direction, to influence through challenging times and to create a quorum. Someone to drive people to be vested in what the organization is striving for, or to introduce a different way of doing things.*

> *There were times when we needed a leader – one person: when time was short, when things were highly controversial, when there was a wide pool of opinions. When there are multiple factions it's hard to believe that leadership by committee will work. We needed a leader to corral; to focus, to motivate us in one aligned*

direction, to push consensus and decision (like a quarterback).   But there's a

downside if this singular leader doesn't gain engagement and buy-in: people leave.

In their later reflections, participants found pros and cons with the traditional individual leadership structure as well as their new "leaderless" structures and approach.

No one leader works well in every situation. Leadership is a group dynamic; it takes technique to build that capability. It would have been easier, but less effective to simply say "you're the leader." One leader cannot create passion and energy in the whole team; the team members have to do that for themselves.

In summary, at times the groups found greater effectiveness in their new organic structures – members were highly engaged by the freedom, variety, and agency to gravitate toward various attractors and interests; the lateral web of relationship offered richer, thicker synergistic contributions than the traditional structure of leader-as-expert, others as followers. At the same time, they struggled with letting go of more familiar structural paradigms of leader as individual, and replacing those structures with new, as yet unknown forms of collective relating. Chapter 2 presented that systems are at their most creative when they are at a state of disequilibrium, balanced on the edge between chaos and order. As these experienced leaders came together, they found it challenging to allow the state of disequilibrium, and would often step in with their traditional means of leading to try and induce order through individual control.

There were times, especially during conflict, when for the sake of speed and efficiency they expressed a wish to hand over control to an individual leader—one who would make decisions on behalf of the group. However, they realized this gain in efficiency would have its trade-offs in richness of collaborative contribution and collective accountability. Over time, they began to let go of the need to create formal structures, and stopped looking for leadership within an individual or a structure. Instead, they accepted their more organic and ever-changing form.

When I surveyed participants about similar practices they were able to transfer into their workplace, the responses indicated that "building alliances and networks" and "greater inclusion of others" held benefits.

> *I've found that I can build alliances by reaching out to team members personally to get to know them and by spending time with them during meeting breaks or dinners.*

> *I was able to leverage my network of connections within the organization to connect members of our project team with key stakeholders in order to facilitate information gathering, to build support for ideas and to form consensus. This allowed our team to quickly and effectively develop a cohesive scope and deployment plan.*

Reflecting on this first practice, I thought about the name of the theory I had selected for my dissertation, Relational Leadership. Fundamental to all leadership processes, to all being, is the concept of relationship. As I routinely watched these teams come together and execute their work, I also observed them actively enhancing relationships: asking each other about families and interests, disclosing stories of struggle, articulating personal motivators, or just sharing a pizza and beer. These actions helped to weave and strengthen the web of connections that later supported their meaningful interaction; they built a community of shared interests, values, and rapport. Reflection means to look back and examine one's own assumptions and theories of the world, and to consider where changes and adjustments in those mental models might be in order. As I reflected on the organizations within which I had worked, I remembered how the structures formed the relationships: *I am your boss*, or *you are my peer*. People appear to be connected by lines drawn on a hierarchy map, but they are not connected in true community. There was a time when I thought that designing the right map – one that connected people with the right solid and dotted lines – would bring about the structural relationships needed to implement strategies. But over the years, I've learned that lines

don't create relationships, and the strength of relationships needed for large-scale efforts go far beyond mere lines drawn on a page.

Working in Service of the Whole

Accomplishing the tasks and processes traditionally taken on by the leader through new forms of coordinated interaction and distributed responsibility.

In their comprehensive review of leadership in teams, Morgeson, DeRue, and Karam (2010) define 15 different team leadership functions. To help a team be most effective, there are a lot of tasks to get done in service of the whole team, and these are typically accomplished by the individual team leader. However another author states that the leadership role is "to do, or get done, whatever is not being adequately handled for group needs" (McGrath, 1962; p 5), and hints that anyone who accomplishes these tasks is acting in a leadership role. From this stance, there are a number of potential sources (informal, formal, internal, and external) for leadership. Although the action learning teams had not appointed an individual leader, they recognized from their past experiences in teams the importance of ensuring that certain tasks or processes were completed, and began to wrestle with how these would be fulfilled, and by whom.

Once such task was scheduling and facilitating the ongoing dialog process that occurred within conference calls and meetings. Groups found that this was best accomplished as a rotating role, so as not to attach the role attributes to a given person, and so that each person could bring their own unique contributions to the role in turn. Over time, they identified other routine tasks required for effective groups, such as time keeping, making appointments, calling meetings, writing agendas, taking notes, creating a repository for shared information, and others. Group members felt mutual responsibility for accomplishing these tasks, so they tended to share, distribute, or rotate the duties, again as a means of neither identifying a given person with a given role nor limiting the diversity of contributions to that function. This approach seemed to follow the concepts of shared or distributed leadership as discussed in Chapter 3.

> *From week to week someone would be the moderator who led the meeting or*
> *conference call. If there was a lack of consensus, this person would help us*

converge. But it was through facilitating the dialog, not by making the decision themselves.

We needed a central person as coordinator and organizer for each meeting, to help us navigate through the noise, ensure we were listening to one another… helped us realize its non-productive for us all to talk at once; someone to re-frame at times.

We always had a person on point, the facilitator. However, this was not usually the person who was most instrumental in moving things forward… that was usually the other team members. We didn't like the term 'leader' because it implies ownership, and in this case everyone had ownership and accountability.

In addition to accomplishing the simple task of organizing the meetings, they realized that this role served many other process needs of the team – such as helping them to reframe, foster, and forward dialog. The facilitator was able to serve this function not by taking over or making decisions, but through actions that enabled, fostered, and promoted relationship and collaboration. In more traditional groups, there is only one generally accepted way of moving through a group dialog: the leader's way. In contrast, having different people rotate through this facilitator role brought diverse approaches and styles to the group, allowing them to make progress in novel ways.

Overall, the groups found that their functional needs were very real and needed to be handled in some way, but not always via a formal individual leader. Instead, they were able to create new ways of providing for these needs, such as via delegation within and external to the team, splitting and sharing tasks, outsourcing tasks, and other creative means. With tasks distributed rather than focused, they struggled somewhat with fostering sufficient divergence (be efficient and effective in maximizing contributions) and yet appropriately moving toward convergence and action. Some members expressed this struggle in their narratives.

The negative point was that we lost continuity; we could have been more efficient by having a single person directing, but that would have served only the short term need and not the long term, other learning objectives.

The issue of distributed or shared leadership is that you can have too many cooks in the kitchen, too many areas of expertise to bring together. In a crisis you need singular leadership in order to be bold, to take a firm stand. Someone who impacts the broad audience and gets commitment and buy in from everyone; one who fosters urgency.

When I surveyed for similar practices transferred to the workplace, participants wrote about their realization that they did not need to be the heroic leader who independently knew all the answers and accomplished the tasks. Instead, they found they could work with the contemporary requirements of increased scale and scope by distributing and sharing the "leadership" and involvement on tasks. They frequently listed "delegation" and "working through networks" as important new practices they used in their corporate roles.

My responsibilities are now more diverse; I'm less specialized and more of a generalist. I used to know every nuance and detail of my organization, but now I depend on other people more. I know much less about the day to day. I delegate, have more appreciation for leveraging my direct reports. You must foster collaboration, cannot make the results alone. If you don't collaborate, you can't succeed.

I'm less individualistic; more networking, building teams, more influence, more alignment. I've changed from always being the first one to speak and get my opinions out to now being someone who listens, pays attention to others, follows up with questions. Personally, I've become a more relaxed leader, let others help to lead, I need less control.

Participants recognized that in spite of their desire to operate in new, unstructured ways, there were a certain number of fundamental tasks –essential to any team—that needed to get done. During this practice, I found groups operating in ways closely aligned with the theories describing shared and distributed leadership. If I had focused only on this practice of the groups – on how they distributed fundamental tasks—then perhaps the theories from shared and distributed leadership would have been sufficient to describe team behavior. However, shared and distributed leadership still view the group as a reducible collection of individuals and efficient processes, and attends to the tactical without generating new options and possibilities for action. I wanted to view the group's behavior from a more relational, holistic stance, one which might re-construct leadership.

Borrowing from the concepts of complex adaptive systems, I viewed the groups as an integrated collective, as interconnected and interdependent. So, while there was indeed an element of simply distributing the functional tasks, taking a systems view allowed me to understand the group in a relational sense. From systems theory, we know that a living system must accomplish basic needs such as respiration, metabolism, and reproduction. The way in which each system accomplishes these basic tasks, however, can be quite novel, and allows these systems to adapt to a huge variety of environments.   Consider for example the variety of noses among mammals, the gills of fishes, and the combined mechanisms of amphibians… all to accomplish respiration.

Following that analogy, I considered how action learning teams found novel methods for accomplishing the same fundamental processes via a broad variety of strategies that were adapted to the current environment and resources available. There existed a network of ever-changing relationships and roles for tasks, rather than a formal rigid structure. By distributing and sharing fundamental tasks and decision-making, there arose within the group a collective capacity for reconstructing the direction and processes for the overall group. There was a sense of mutual understanding, of mutual direction that belonged to the group as a whole, resulting from the tasks they had accomplished as a whole, and this was not reducible to individual actions, decisions, or relationships.

In reflection, I recalled my past roles in project management, and the popular best practices of creating charts to ensure we knew who was responsible and accountable for each task. We were interested in who was leading each process, as much as what process was being accomplished. In cases of failure, this led to blame -- since responsibility for the process could be pinned to an individual. In cases of success, this led to one person taking credit for the efforts of many – since responsibility for the task was clearly allocated to that individual. Neither outcome reflected the teamwork and collaboration we strived toward. How different that is from my typical family life at home. There, we all understand what needs doing each day: the table must be set, drinks poured, dishes cleared and washed, kids transported, coats and shoes picked up and put away. Because of busy schedules, we don't assign these tasks to a specific person, and yet everything gets done (sometimes creatively) because of dedication to this same practice: working in service of the whole. There is caring for each other, and for what needs to get done. As I reconsider leadership in the light of relational theory, I am reminded that it is a process, not a person. We can help enable relational leadership through being clear about the tasks and processes required, and by fostering a culture where everyone cares for each other and for the processes that service the whole.

Meaning-Making Through Dialog

Building and negotiating shared meaning through open, candid dialog – especially face to face.

As discussed in the first practice, weaving a web of relationships is an important practice in that it supports collaboration. Through relational collaboration, teams integrate shared meaning from the diverse, fragmented, and complex sets of needs, expectations, and goals, enabling them to engage in collective action (Ospina and Foldy 2010).

In the action learning teams, meaning was not imposed on the groups by a single leader with a privileged voice of objective truth. Instead, there was opportunity for contribution from the voices of all team members toward one or many subjective truths. With this opportunity, shared meaning could not be taken for granted – it needed to be constructed through the work of collaborative dialog. This dialog, in turn, had to be supported by relationship. As suggested by Bouwan & Hosking (2000), I observed that the quality of a team's dialog was often an analog for the quality of their underlying relationships. Teams that held very shallow reflection dialog or permitted only few voices in dialog were most likely the teams that later experienced more issues in unresolved conflict and blocked progress. Conversely, teams that put more time, effort, and multiple voices into their dialogs were more successful in both their performance and their learning goals. Coaching their dialog sessions was often helpful, especially when teams got stuck at project phase changes.

> We ran into conflict and got stuck as we were changing project phases-- from research gathering to forming some suggested actions. At that point we had to interpret all the inputs, organize our next steps. What got us un-stuck was more communications – going back to the key questions we'd started with and ensuring we still had a shared understanding of the desired outcomes.
>
> At that point there was a lot more debate, different perspectives and opinions, lots of talk and no decisions. No one truly has the right answer, so no single person can

just make a decision. What helped was for our team to sit with the coach or
sponsor, have them ask us questions, guide our dialog, help us step back and take
a fresh perspective.

All groups I observed eventually experienced a degree of conflict in their communication, in their understanding of the problem, or in determining the best direction or most effective way forward. Many times, resolving these issues and enabling the group's progress is an expectation associated with the traditional leader role. Without this traditional role, the action learning teams needed to create their own unique ways of collaborating – to build shared meaning, make progress through conflict, and continue with effective action toward their goals. What all teams demonstrated in common was using dialog as a transformational means of interaction; continuing dialog to reach the state of shared meaning.

Shared meaning is not a state where everyone agrees to the same point of view – it occurs when the members grasp each other's positions well enough to accept their different interpretations of the problem, and to exercise collective intelligence about how to proceed toward solving it (Conklin, 2006). One participant stated this well:

At one point our group was divided, and I stepped in to help us find middle ground.
We reviewed both the short term and the long term goals. We defined "profitable"
in a way that everyone could understand and agree to. Everybody's crystal ball is
somewhat limited; no one has the complete and full picture. We have to ensure
we have the right historical information, and understand what we have/don't have
in order to make a decision –determine the level of confidence in that decision.

Chapter 3 discussed the views of distributed or situated cognition, whereby knowledge is constructed as learners make sense of their experiences. This theory also posits that knowledge is distributed and exists in the form of practices within a given context. In that sense, learning requires social participation; cognition takes place in the social environment as learners actively seek meaning. Learning means effective participation in the agreed practices, as they are socially valued and pragmatic for that group or culture.

With the action learning groups, I observed that they began to experience and recognize this form of situated cognition. Through their social interaction – their relationships and their dialog – they created pragmatic learning, visible in their practices. They learned primarily by doing and by talking, by action and dialogic reflection.

Chapter 1 discussed the changing contemporary world, where globalism and rapid communication of data brings us many disparate yet valid points of view from customers, employees, shareholders, and communities. The ability to simultaneously hold these multiple views in mind was new for most group members, and yet this was an important skill for participants to learn. In order to better cope with contemporary challenges, participants needed a new way of thinking: a systems approach that allowed them to hold several ideas simultaneously, rather than immediately sorting them into categories of black or white, wrong or right. Participants were coached toward a less empirical analysis, having them instead apply a more holistic and constructionist approach. I was observing for these characteristics when I reflected on the group's overall capacity for collaboration.

Joe Raelin (2006) also lists some key principles associated with collaboration in his article *Does Action Learning Promote Collaborative Leadership*:

- Collaboration begins any dialog with a stance of non-judgmental inquiry.
- It requires submitting one's own ideas and views to the critical scrutiny of others.
- Collaborators need to entertain the view that something new or unique might arise from a mutual inquiry that could reconstruct the participants' view of reality.

Like Raelin's teams, the action learning groups I observed adopted these principles-- participants were willing to submit ideas and allow them to be further molded through the inquiry and dialog.

> *When conflicts arose, we concluded that phone calls didn't work – we needed 4-5 hours in person to put ideas out there, talk them through, gain agreement and*

unity. Having more time for discussions, reading body language showed whether or not people were bought in.

At one point our team was in two different camps. Someone saw where we were headed, reached out within her own group to garner support. The information in front of her helped-- she used it and brought others along, made us feel a part of the decision, not forced.   We all bring our own diverse way of being… and tend to take a stance based on that view. Sometimes we need a new way of looking at things, as well as the openness to see it differently.

Participants also noted that their relationships were often enhanced by the proximity that led to more frequent face-to-face interaction, and that in-person dialog was more impactful than virtual dialog.

The geography of team members influenced core membership. Those who were close-- located on the same floor-- often met. Those face-to-face meetings did much more to move the project along than the larger whole team conference calls.

I'm not optimistic about virtual meetings; someone will be on mute doing expense reports. We needed to be face-to-face in order to read body language, expressions. Face-to-face meetings broke down walls. We were able to drive consensus for special decisions.

First we were chasing our own tail, lots of calls but not much made it to paper. When we met in person, it made us much more focused and gave us momentum. I suggest in person meetings sooner, more often. With a conference call, we meet only an hour and people are multi-tasking, too many distractions. Face-to-face we spend 4 hours, more dedicated time, get to know people better. Conversations take on new meaning; personal time together creates psychic impact.

One enabling behavior in this practice was moving away from being a leader who has the 'right' answer and simply communicates this to others, since others may think that from their perspective they, too, have the 'right' answer. Instead, participants moved toward

being a leader who involves others – inviting and listening to their opinions, building on the ideas of others, and melding these into a solution the entire group can buy into. Toward those ends, participants often cited the behavior of asking questions more than making statements as particularly helpful.

> *As the subject matter expert for our project, I've had to learn to let the process unfold and resist the temptation to jump in with an answer. There are several ways to solve a problem and present a solution. Even though I may be uncomfortable for a moment, listening to everyone's opinion results the best solution and no one feels left out. There is greater strength in a cohesive team rather than the performance of a single individual.*

> *Before, I would go into a project effort thinking 'I know the right answer,' and was not open to other people's thoughts. I generally would just wait it out until the others were tired and looking for direction, and then at that moment, I would provide the direction. Now, I find it much easier to try to stay open to concerns they may have, be more mindful of group dynamics, of other people's opinions, to listen better. It becomes a much more effective way of working with colleagues.*

> *I gathered my team's collective ideas from over the course of a few weeks and consolidated them into a functional format. I then led the team through a three-hour process of reviewing and evaluating all of the solutions on the table. At the end of the process the team had narrowed in on three solutions, which were further developed into the final recommendations for our project. This process was a departure from my normal behaviors as I would usually develop my own ideas and then try to build consensus. Using this framework I was able to engage the team in thoughtful discussion for a positive outcome.*

Since the action learning peer groups did not have a formal authoritarian structure, members learned to influence, encourage, and motivate without authority. They were less pressured to have the right answer themselves (as might be expected of a traditional

leader), and instead were more open to dialog and collaboration where meaning could be constructed.

Participants also indicated that they had broadened their suite of tools for dialog, moving from a pure rational or data-driven approach to also include relational approaches: more collaboration, inspiration, and connecting with others.

> *Generally speaking, when it comes to leadership, there are many different strong personalities trying to influence the entire group to go in a direction. More specifically, everyone has their own ideas and strengths, and it seems that people express themselves along what they know, what they are comfortable with. I have realized that no matter what the situation is, in order to influence an idea or another person, you have to speak their language that they are comfortable speaking—speak to their interests and motives.*

According to Giddens (1991), the dialogic process of action learning can help participants balance the dilemma of unification versus fragmentation of ourselves and our being in the world -- the polarities of protecting one's identity (and view) versus yielding in simple conformity to outside influences. Through dialog in the company of trusted others, participants are better able to confront themselves and create alternative interpretations of their own constructed reality. As individuals and as a group, they are able to change their course of action based on a vigorous and open exchange of views.

Leadership as relational practice is interested in constructs such as shared dialogue and sensemaking, collaborative learning, and adaptation as a result of that learning. The practices of relational leadership include a collective willingness to jump in and engage in activity, to reflect (during and after the action), and then adapt actions and goals to achieve best level of "fitness" with larger systems and environments – with the context at large. These relational practices are constructed and achieved largely through the ongoing dialog of the group, and therefore the quality of the group's relationships and practices are reflected in the quality of their dialog.

It is late night, and rather than sleeping I am reflecting on this practice of meaning-making through dialog. Today was day one of a three-day summit, where representatives from six different legacy organizations have come together as the result of several rounds of mergers and acquisitions. I am expected to lead this integration effort, but I don't know the history of these organizations, I don't know our current situation, and I certainly don't yet know our future.   In the earlier days of my career, I thought the leader should be the person who had all the answers, who clearly saw the future, and who was confident in articulating a strong vision and direction. But the world where businesses held that kind of certainty is long gone. The issues are too complex for one person to understand or to solve. I want to enable relational leadership for this new, integrated organization, and I want to exercise this practice as a means for that intention. At tomorrow's summit, I will not have a strong vision and direction to articulate. Instead, I will have questions, and tools for dialog. If we are to find our way forward through this uncertainty, we must find it together. We must build relationship, collaborate openly in dialog, and make our own meaning.

Converging on Purpose and Direction

Prioritizing collective goals to create collective identity; promoting mutual accountability through feedback; balancing performance goals with learning goals.

As the teams moved beyond their initial forming stages toward action, they began to place more primacy on the collective relationships and practices rather than having the *right* organizational structure and roles. Significantly at that point, there was a shift in the increased usage of "we" language in their narratives, as they identified with these collective relationships, practices, and shared goals.

> *We thought of ourselves as 'The Team.' Not the individuals but the Team. Each individual brought something different to the table. There were sparks of passion after we moved past the 'nice' phase of dealing with each other. After that I was able to see each individual differently and see them as part of the Team. I wanted them to exceed their expectations and felt that their success would enhance mine.*

> *I was amazed by the synergy from the first day; it was as if we had all met in a prior life. The group members thought not in terms of 'I' but in 'we,' and embraced the team approach. Not what 'I did' and 'I think,' but what 'we think, we value'… everyone's opinion was respected. We were all involved, active, taking part in decisions.*

Teams reflected that they felt a sense of unity resulting from their common purpose and shared goals, as well as from their agreed practices toward those ends. As members gave primacy to this collective relationality, rather than how to stand out as individuals, a stronger sense of shared identity began to evolve. Their sense of collectivism was realized in their synergistic contributions; they were interconnected in goals and interdependent in action, moving ahead as one.

> *We connected to serve a single, shared purpose. It didn't matter who was the 'head' of any group, we were all business partners, all responsible for one brand.*

There were no silos. We listened to each other, learned from each other. We shared delegation; people were willing to take on work. Each person was an accountability partner to the others.

This was a collaborative effort, a sense of being a team. In the group we all shared a common goal, as opposed to the workplace, where there are conflicting views, intentions, ideas of what the end product should be… working cross functionally it's tough to manage varied interests.

In their group reflections, I heard members often speak about having "trust" and "respect" for one another as indicators of how aligned they were. Initially, this trust and respect was measured by one's openness to diverse and synthesized points of view (prioritization of the relational aspects and a collective goal) rather than advocating one's own best answer or agenda (an individual goal or orientation).

The team was filled with great people that I respected. No one was out to make a name, to be a celebrity. There was team focus, to get it done. The marker pen got handed off. There was a better connection with my peers in this team than with anyone I've experienced in my professional career.

We trusted and respected each other. There was no outside agenda. People took time to reach out directly, not for themselves, but for the sake of the team. We trusted ourselves, displayed best practices for the organization.

Those strong, assertive personalities speak more, so we are more aware of their perspective than others. But are they speaking for the entire group, or for their own agenda? Does everyone else agree? You have to watch them to determine trust, and see if it is their agenda or the agenda of the group they are advocating… Are they speaking from desire or from fact? They must flesh out their perspectives with reality and facts.

Through reflective dialog, they further interpreted this "trust and respect" as members demonstrating more dedication to the collective goal than to their individual goals.

Members did put in a lot of extra time and effort into their action learning projects in addition to demanding job roles. They held high expectations of themselves and of others, and members expected to see an equal amount of contribution from each participant. Meetings often took place outside of normal business hours, and deliverables required effort in addition to the normal working day.

In my observations, when a group member frequently missed meetings or was late with a deliverable, the level of respect and trust that had been built in that relationship declined – evidenced through participants speaking less favorably of that group member, showing less willingness to share work with them on key deliverables or to partner with them, and referring to that person as not being a part of the "core team" (being separate from the collective).

> In our group, we had some uneven work distribution which was frustrating. I learned that it is best to bring this to the fore and to speak one's mind.

> Some people were more engaged than others, they would check in and check out. Depends on how their manager saw participation in the program… did the manager see it as important? Were they supportive? Did the program help develop the participant to the next step/level, and was there some shared accountability? How did the program fit into the participant's personal career plan? All these affected the person's level of engagement and participation.

> On the job we delegate individual or departmental objectives, but these may not all be aligned and balanced. Some managers get extra tasks, or the future depends on some tasks more than others. There is a shifting balance of commitment. In our group project, we were equally focused, equally committed. We had a common big picture view even when there were many different perspectives on it.

Through these reflections, team members were beginning to highlight some key differences between the relational leadership they were now enacting, and the more

traditional forms of organizing and leading. They highlighted the uneven distribution of tasks and effort in the structured workplace, as opposed to the mutual dedication, task sharing, and more open resource flow they found in their project teams. They also highlighted the "silo" approach in their workplace, where a person's role may commit them to completing only a portion of the larger deliverable, and where a person might concern themselves only with their individual contribution rather than completion of the entire deliverable. By contrast, they viewed the collective team as working toward collective goals and outcomes, each person contributing toward a synthesis for which all were accountable.

In addition to agreeing on shared goals, another challenge that groups faced in the early stages of action was holding each other accountable toward their shared goals. That is, when a member missed a deadline, took on less responsibility than others, or demonstrated less commitment to the shared goals, the group had difficulty in providing direct feedback to the person. As mentioned in the earlier practices, functional tasks such as providing corrective feedback are traditionally relegated to an individual leader with the proper authority attributed via their job description. As peers without this formal authority, group members found it more difficult to address this uncomfortable necessity. However, more mature and resilient relationships grew over time, as did the group's accepted practices of feedback – allowing participants to provide the direct feedback associated with mutual accountability.

Over the course of the action learning projects, good dialog built stronger relationships, and stronger relationships contributed to richer dialog. As I observed the groups, I noted that early on, when they had spent little time together, that they had not yet established relationships that would support open, honest feedback. Initially, members were hesitant to speak openly about themselves or about others. However, as time went on and they established more trust, respect, and relationship, they also improved the quality and candor of their conversations. During the project, they were increasingly able to openly reflect on group practices and offer constructive feedback to one another.

When we disagreed we still respected each other… moved on, moved forward. Communication and listening were good.

It's OK for someone in the group to point out that what we're doing isn't working, to suggest a change. Once we started to get tougher more often, we began to be more cohesive, less rudder-less. There was person-to-person commitment; personal relationship, talking to each other. We even started joking, and through that kind of relationship people were willing to let go of their positions and change.

One measure that groups often spoke of as a proxy for their quality of relationship was their ability to be direct with one another in offering feedback. With groups who had strong, resilient relationships, feedback was offered in an open, honest, straightforward way.

Peer feedback was valuable, honest, and helpful. No agenda, just genuine. We were nice to each other for too long, could have been more forthright sooner.

We were all very comfortable expressing our thoughts and feelings and ideas… also willing to listen to each other. There was conviction – say what we believe in and then act on it. Say what we think is right, then have facts to support it. We were passionate, it flowed easily.

With groups who had not built strong relationships, they withheld feedback, or were just "nice to each other" without revealing true thoughts, genuine emotions, or corrective practices. For these teams, they focused mostly on performance goals, as feedback was a necessary (but missing) element to support learning goals.

At times I felt no one wanted to address the issues of the team. We were so focused on the task, on looking good to our executive sponsors.

As action learning teams, these groups were tasked to pursue two types of interdependent goals. The initial set of goals related to *performance* – researching and

crafting a set of thoughtful recommendations regarding the 'wicked problem' with which their team had been tasked. However, given that this performance goal was complex and required new knowledge, skills, and behaviors, the team was also required to set *learning* goals (Seijts et al 2001, 2004).   In the LEAD program, participants were asked to determine their own optimum balance of performance and learning goals.

> *The fact that we started this as a development program, with open feedback and supportive team spirit was helpful. We came in with a development focus, with a desire to learn and grow as much as to do. It was a chance to pause and be reflective. In the working world, the reality is that development is seldom on the agenda.*

> *Through my interviews and research into the problem, I learned new perspectives, a new way of seeing the situation – each market is different. And from working in the group, I learned a new way of seeing myself in how I relate to others. It's been great to balance the task with development and learning.*

> *We learn and develop because we're all here to support each other in that effort. It's not enough that I contribute just from a technical view, I have to also think about how I can understand and support help my teammates' development needs.*

From the language of systems, we know that a complex adaptive system has both performance and learning goals: it functions at the edge of chaos, dynamically adapting both its means and its ends in order to achieve best fit with the environment. Similarly, a group faced with a wicked problem does not know in advance the best outcome nor the best approach for the problem, and must dynamically adapt. Traditional structures and approaches do not apply, because the problem is beyond the scope of typical Newtonian frameworks, analysis, and forecasting. For these problems, groups require knowledge and capability that they do not yet possess in order to move toward a solution; they must simultaneously pursue both the solution and the learning, each contributing to the other. Through this process, they must also possess the commitment to move ahead, through uncertainty and ambiguity, toward a solution that is yet unknown.

Author Richard Hackman (2004) offered his views on what three elements constitute team effectiveness, as follows:

1. The productive output of the team (that is, its product, service, or decision) meets or exceeds the standards of quantity, quality, and timeliness of the team's clients – the people who receive, review, and/or use the output.
2. The social processes the team uses in carrying out the work enhance members' capability to work together interdependently in the future.
3. The group experience, on balance, contributes positively to the learning and personal well-being of individual team members.

I observed that the teams were explicit in their pursuit of all three of these criteria as a part of their shared purpose, direction and goals. They focused a lot on performance goals as the ultimate output of the team, on providing high quality recommendations to their sponsors. They also focused on social processes – how they worked together. In action, this meant pausing for reflection and after-action reviews on team process and interactions. Finally, they also focused on learning goals – learning about the project topic, as well as learning about how they interacted as a team. Members were committed to the project output, and to the well-being of other team members.

In summary, the group began to function much more as a collective after they had established their shared goals – even when the goal was merely to go on together through uncertainty and ambiguity. The sense of shared purpose gave them identity as a collective, and led to much more frequent use of "we" language. To participate fully in the collective, members were expected to place priority on the shared goal, and not allow individual agendas to interfere; they had to give primacy to the "we" rather than the "I." Since entities and collective were joined, there was mutual accountability for goals. With this view, members learned to provide candid feedback that reinforced this accountability and held them together as a collective. Goals included both performance outcomes and learning outcomes; the group understood that they needed to learn, develop, and

continually adapt through uncertainty and ambiguity as they pursued an emerging solution.

Iterating Design of the Path and the Destination

Offering a partial solution or direction (a straw man) that the group could continue to modify; helping ensure collective ownership of the outcome.

In concert with their ability to leverage dialog toward shared understanding, the action learning groups also employed an iterative solutioning process loosely based on design thinking. Chapter 4 describes this process and the action learning project phases in more depth. Generally, the process involves defining the problem, gathering a fair amount (but not complete amount) of research data, then beginning to iterate solutions early, even as design requirements and goals continued to evolve. From this series of successive approximations, teams were able to determine what additional information they needed, could more quickly reduce the number of scenarios to consider, and could continually refine their selected scenario. Leadership as *process* privileges action as a basis for learning, so from this view it is important to have the group active as soon as feasible. Learning occurs through action, through "making", and action leads to further understanding. Leadership processes are then self-correcting-- participants engage, reflect, and refine their actions to better align with their evolving goals.

From the viewpoint of distributed cognition, knowledge is situated and distributed – embedded within and spread across the participants, their relationship, situation, and their context, rather than being fully contained within the mind of an individual. Faced with a complex environment and wicked problems, the existing cognitive structures of individuals are inadequate, and there is a need to construct new knowledge by working together within the collective group, situation, and context. No one heroic leader has the answer; the answer must emerge from the leadership processes of the group.

In my observations, the challenge for most participants came during their attempts to offer initial strawman solutions based on incomplete data. In their real-world jobs, their roles and rewards are constructed along the more traditional expectations of leaders, such as being the expert, having the right answers, and knowing what to do. Given the ambiguous and uncertain nature of the action learning problems, however, there are no

"best" or "right" solutions, and individuals are unable to create anything other than incomplete or inaccurate solutions.

> *In place of finding the 'right' answer we just tried to gain a shared understanding of 'possible' answers.*

The initial solutions constructed are partial at best, and yet are a necessary starting point from which the team can learn and modify. No one member of the group has complete information and expertise, neither does the team as a whole have complete information and expertise. An appropriate principle is: *there is no whole truth, so don't collect data forever.*

Teams were encouraged to "fail fast" as learning, to both perform and experiment simultaneously. Participants were encouraged to become more comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, particularly in the form of lack of complete data. However, they struggled with this new approach.

> *Once we had the data-- piles of information-- we got really stuck. There was no singular leader to tell us where to go next, to make assignments, make bold moves, give direction and an outline of what's ahead. At that point, [name] took it on himself to push out a framework, a storyboard outline of where we might go. In the end, our solution deliverable wasn't even close to his proposal, but at least it got us started, gave us something to start with and to keep modifying along the way.*

> *We got bogged down in detail analysis. But then we realized that data is only a part of the whole; we needed to zoom out and look at the whole again to find direction. We re-read the project strategy and goals to get us going again. Our executive sponsor resolved some decision points when we asked him to 'help us tell the story you want to tell.'*

> *One obstacle we faced was trying to manage scope. Some people on the team were just insatiable for data – they wanted more and more; got mired in the data.*

For me, time was so pressing that it urged me on. I used an 80/20 rule and tried to gather just the most important pieces of data that would allow us to move forward with decisions.

As mentioned several times in participant narratives, the most helpful practice at this phase was creating a partial solution – a framework or structure that was offered as yet incomplete, open to further modification, and yet served as a starting point for the group's further iterations.

I think when a leader has a vision or idea, he can communicate or present that and not be concerned if it's 100% right or not fully fleshed out. The whole team can take it and shape it into what they need and agree on to move forward.

The person who creates the storyboard [outline of the final presentation] adds a lot of structure and direction for the group just by helping us see the endpoint; it's like a framework -- then we can fill in the details.

From my observations, as well as participant narratives, it was important that when the straw man solution was offered, those who proposed it needed to remain open to further changes and iterations. Group dialog, often guided by a facilitator or coach, was still vital at this stage to ensure shared understanding and buy-in.

Having someone as a subject matter expert very close to the topic has both pros and cons… it's hard for them to be objective, to take in others' views when they may already have their own. Their influence is too strong, less openness. In those cases, it helped to have an outside facilitator in order to ensure process and equal participation.

At times the information or the feedback from stakeholders was contradictory, ambiguous. [Name] was able to resolve this; he had courage, was bold, took a stance, and got us focused. Why did we agree to follow? We agreed with him, found consensus, because he was not alone in his thinking-- he voiced the unspoken thoughts of the group.

One frequently cited topic was coping with the inherent stress of ambiguity. With certainty comes a level of security – knowing what will happen next is reassuring, and allows us to set our emotional state accordingly. Not knowing what is next brings on a state of heightened anxiety. From my review of survey responses, participants practiced not only maintaining their own calm during uncertainty, but also reassuring and encouraging others.

> There are not many days where what I've planned for the day actually goes through; one economic shift changes everything.   All this uncertainty leads to anxiety, so you need to be opportunistic and keep a positive attitude, stay up, maintain an even keel, push forward with agendas in spite of uncertainty.

Another action participants frequently applied was creating multiple paths forward, maintaining multiple options for action as opposed to attempting to quickly converge toward a single known or certain option. In building these options, they found that it was not beneficial to get 'stuck' gathering data in an attempt to build certainty – it was better to gather an appropriate amount of data, to leverage experience, and to move ahead with decisions even in the face of uncertainty.

> You need flexibility, to be nimble, able to turn on a dime, always think of contingency plans, always have not only option A, but also options B, C, and D. About 50% of my time is strategy, and about 50% is execution -- telling people where we're going as much as doing it. We have to build the road as we're walking it.

> You must be able to make decisions during ambiguity, even when you don't have all the data points. In those cases, I take a collaborative approach – bring a lot more people into the room – rely on them. I substitute other people's experience and expert opinions for more data points; consensus allows us a better ability to predict. Open up to other people; there is a lot of talent here, so leverage it. If we're going to grow, then we must rely on people's experience. Coming out of the recent bad period of '08 and '09 -- from those experiences we learned a lot,

understand better how the markets work. We must rely on the embedded,

institutional knowledge.

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This concludes Chapter 6's presentation of the observations and five relational leadership practices that emerged from the LEAD program's various action learning teams. Next, in Chapter 7, I will provide conclusions and further discussion of the outcomes.

Chapter 7: Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

With this chapter I conclude the dissertation by presenting the project findings and discussing parallels with systems theory and relational leadership theory. I also discuss the implications, limitations of the study, and ideas for further research. Finally, I present my hope that this study contributes to the literature in that it provides illustrations and insights on the practices and specific narratives of groups in an action learning context as they pursued coordinated action and constructed meaning for relational leadership.

Aims of This Study

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? How could organizations begin to re-define leadership in a way that would provide more options for meaningful action, in the face of complex challenges? Many traditional organizations, and their constructs of leadership, were formed during the industrial and modern eras and continue with the clockwork thinking born of those eras. However, in the postmodern era, challenges of the business environment have become more complex with forces such as globalization, diversity of work forces, data proliferation, the rapid pace of technology change, environmental sustainability, and disruptive innovations, to name a few. Such a world holds less predictability – it is described as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Business organizations and the communities affected by those organizations face more complex and adaptive challenges than ever before.

Businesses previously thrived on certainty, hierarchy, and linear order: leadership through command and control. But these individual approaches to leadership are insufficient to address the adaptive challenges and entangled social messes of a more complex world. No one leader alone has the expertise to contend with all the

information and interdependencies relevant to important decisions. For any decision, there are multiple perspectives, each of which may bear significantly on the outcome. However, this time of change brings the possibility to adopt new thinking, new vocabulary, and new ways of constructing the meaning of leadership beyond the individual or small aggregates of individuals.

After a wide scan of literature, I selected relational leadership theory as having the best fit for my constructionist stance and my application to the problem statement. However, as a consultant responsible for helping to build organizational leadership capacity, I did not find sufficient documentation of praxis to correspond with the theory. My purpose was to document more of that praxis by constructing 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?

Over a period of three years, I participated as an observer in 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, grounded theory, and abductive reasoning, as well as the epistemology of systems and social constructionism.

Discussion of Findings

Summary of key findings

Each of the 29 action learning groups worked with a different adaptive challenge: a complex, broadly scoped business problem or opportunity with many interrelated issues and no clear right or wrong outcome. The action learning teams constructed and

employed the relational practices documented here, and all achieved the goals they with their executive sponsors. This study therefore suggests that by engaging in relational practices, participants can enable leadership as a collective capacity for addressing adaptive challenges. The project also achieved its purpose, in that it provides documentation of some of the specific praxis associated with constructing leadership from a relational stance. Chapter 6 presents the outcome of this study in an abductive discussion of five relational practices that emerged in the groups' narratives as they pursued coordinated action toward their business issue:

Weaving a web of lateral relationships: letting go of traditional role paradigms; exploring and inventing new networks of relationship to support collaborative interaction.

Working in service of the whole: accomplishing the tasks and processes traditionally taken on by the leader through new forms of coordinated interaction and distributed responsibility.

Meaning-making through dialog: building and negotiating shared meaning through open, candid dialog – especially face to face.

Converging on purpose and direction: prioritizing collective goals to create collective identity; promoting mutual accountability through feedback; balancing performance goals with learning goals.

Iterating design of the path and the destination: in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty, offering a partial solution (a straw man) the group could continue to modify.

Correlation with systems and relational leadership theory

After completing my written summary of the five practices, I compared them with the original two theories that helped me to frame the study: systems and relational leadership.

Chapter 2 presented an overview of systems theory and the more specific characteristics of complex adaptive systems. It also provided a metaphorical linkage between systems language and business organizations. In that chapter, I provided a paraphrase of that metaphor as follows:

Organizational systems are a collective of diverse, independent participants; the participants are interconnected and interdependent in their relationships; their patterns of interaction are dynamic and self-organizing; they interact with their environment across boundaries; and they adapt toward novel and more complex forms that best suit their shared purpose.

The components of this systems metaphor had correspondence with the five relational practices overall, but I felt that the strongest alignments were as follows:

Organizational systems are a collective of diverse, independent participants; the participants are interconnected and interdependent in their relationships. This component of the systems metaphor aligns well with practice one, weaving a web of lateral relationships, calling attention to the diverse array of participants *and* the collective community which constitute one another. This set of relational connections is far different from the rigid business structures of command and control hierarchy, allowing for more flexibility and more possibility.

Their patterns of interaction are dynamic and self-organizing. This component aligns well with practice two, working in service of the whole. In this practice, participants must create dynamic patterns of interaction and self-organize around the tasks required to meet their evolving project goals. This is far different from responding only to a privileged leader's agenda.

They interact with their environment across boundaries. Although not immediately obvious, the alignment here is with practice three, meaning making through dialog. The connection is in the nature of the task: gathering research information as it flows in from the open system boundary of their environment, and then collectively making meaning of the information.

They adapt toward novel and more complex forms that best suit their shared purpose. This portion of the metaphor corresponds with practices five and four, iterating design of both the path and destination, while converging on purpose and direction through successive approximation. Like a complex adaptive system, the action learning teams continually adapted their means and ends, evolving the clarity of their goal and ultimately meeting it.

Chapter 3 presented an overview of leadership theory, with particular emphasis on relational leadership as guided by a constructionist perspective. There were several important tenets from that chapter that I wish to highlight here for further discussion, relative to the five practices.

A constructionist perspective sees the meaning of leadership as socially constructed -- a negotiated understanding that arises within the context of collective action. From this view, the meaning of leadership emerges through the relational, interactive work of the group, and not from the traits or contributions of specific individuals.   A relational approach to leadership shifts our focus from what it is that we do as individuals to what it is that we make together. Leadership becomes something we perform together, in relationship with each other, rather than an act that one individual does alone or to another. Leadership becomes a dynamic, fluid process during which we make meaning of our current situation together and move forward in coordinated action. This happens when community engages in dialogue and meaning making to collaborate across different perspectives, values, beliefs, cultures, and worldviews.

In summary of the above paragraph, I paraphrased a number of authors and in Chapter 6 offered my position on leadership as: *a community process of meaning making, which unfolds as the group pursues shared goals and faces adaptive challenges*.

Similar to the discussion which relates the systems metaphor to the five practices, I also found the five practices to be well-aligned with the tenets of relational leadership theory, as well as with the elements of this summary position statement on leadership.

Transverse themes in the practices

As my reflections on each of the practices were already presented in Chapter 6, here I would like to discuss the transverse themes that I noticed after the practices were summarized.

Struggles in letting go of the familiar to embrace the new and unknown

The first theme was the inherent struggle in letting go of past paradigms in order to create new ones. This struggle surfaced initially as participants came together in community and began to form new ways of relating without the traditional structures of organizational hierarchy. Participants needed to let go of the individual-centered leader roles and formalized team structures with which they were more familiar. They needed to let go of the need for structured order, control, and equilibrium. They also needed to let go of the idea that an individual leader was required to efficiently move their group through conflict and create convergence on decisions. For each practice, there was an element of letting go of the familiar past and embracing a yet unknown future.

With letting go came a feeling of disorientation, a time of not knowing what was next, or how to move toward it. Letting go was therefore a struggle, an ongoing effort to be free from the constraints of familiar routines, something done tentatively, partially, iteratively, rather than all at once. Fear is a natural reaction when faced with new situations and uncertainty, and a common response to that fear is to retreat into what is more familiar. In the past, when I taught leadership in an experiential adventure environment, I would

support participants in scaling rock walls along steep mountainsides. When a participant was poised on a narrow ledge, with a visceral fear of falling, it was difficult for him to let go of his grip and reach up, unbalanced, searching for a hold that was new and uncertain. That experience has long stayed with me as I coach groups to face their fears, let go, and move on, even when they don't know what is next.

From my observations in the study, groups that were able to let go more quickly were also able to move forward more quickly. They displayed agility in facing what was new and unknown, embracing the opportunity to create new ways of relating, new meaning, new approaches to coordinated action, and ultimately new outcomes.

The importance of shared purpose for integration

Chapter 3 presented that the relational stance is a view on leadership as a field of relationships where the individuals and the collective constitute one another. In this view, participants are engaged as a community, in close-knit fellowship and dialog around shared purpose and goals. As I reflected on how the action learning groups engaged, I could certainly sense this close-knit fellowship – an integrating property that pervaded the community during all practices. Examples and metaphors from systems came to mind—how a system is comprised of many diverse elements and yet is an integrated and non-reducible whole; how a system is in continual adaptation and yet maintains its original identity and function. These systems examples seemed to have some application to the relational practices, as well.

The previous transverse theme discussed the importance of letting go of the familiar past in order to embrace a new and uncertain future. Inherent in this process is the concept of adaptation, or changes that improved functional fit with an environment. The groups were continually adapting and dynamically self-organizing, and yet I wondered what it was that held them together in cohesion, what was the integrating property? In my observations, it was a sense of shared purpose that served as an integrating property for these groups, especially when they were without familiar structures.

One of the five practices that emerged was *converging on purpose and direction*. Participant narratives around that practice spoke about a sense of unity, a shift from the language of "I" to "we." While shared purpose has already been discussed in that practice, I wanted to raise it up as an especially notable theme that impacted all practices. In my observations, it was shared purpose that bound communities together, especially when other structural elements were less clear. A stronger sense of shared purpose yielded a stronger sense of community, evident especially in how equal the level of effort was from group members, as well as the degree of overall group effort.

Trust: the fundamental elements of relationship apply

As I observed the groups and outcomes, another reflection was that trust, a fundamental element in any relationship, is also critical across all relational leadership practices. In fact, trust was one of the most frequently occurring words in all participant narratives. When participants spoke about trust, they were referring to trust in other group members, and in the overall group. As I asked them to expand on their meaning of trust, they usually expressed it as confidence in their expectation that other members would meet their commitments, and that the group overall would meet its commitments in terms of both performance and learning. Just as in the meaning these participants provided, the concept of trust usually expresses the level of confidence in a future action or state. Given that participants were so often venturing into less familiar interactions and less structured processes, their reliance on trust was important as a counterweight to the natural fear involved.

Trust was also an important condition for the participants to continually modify their relationships and interactions through the process of feedback. Throughout the LEAD action learning process, participants were given opportunities to provide each other with feedback. The purpose of the feedback was for learning, and also for improving the quality of relationships: reinforcing useful interactions, dampening or changing less useful ones. In this application, they described their meaning of *trusting others* as a belief that the speaker was conveying truthful and balanced feedback, and in doing so had the receiver's best interests in mind. I observed groups where more trust existed and there

was a richer quality of relationship, evidenced in the rich quality of dialog and feedback. In other groups, where there was less trust and a thinner quality of relationships, the dialog and feedback tended to remain at more surface level, with few insights that could serve to further improve the relationships.

In summary, trust is important in the relational leadership application in two ways: trusting others allows the team to move forward with confidence into the unknown, and trusting others allows for candor in meaningful feedback that strengthens relationships.

Differentiating themes
As I wrote about my observations, I also noticed several themes, common across all the practices, which helped to differentiate relational leadership from more traditional views of leadership, and are represented here as contrasts, or shifts.

The first theme was the shift in emphasis <u>*from the individual to the collective view*</u>, from entities to systems. With a relational leadership lens, we focus not on the parts that comprise a system, but on the whole system and the emergent properties of that system. Reading through each of the five practices, I was able to see that each one referred to a collective-level capacity or outcome, not an aggregate of individual capabilities. In a similar non-reductionist way, I find that the practices themselves do not stand alone, in spite of my artificially separate listing and discussion of each. The practices are integral, and work together to characterize how relational leadership is constructed.

The second theme was a shift in focus <u>*from figure to ground*</u>, emphasizing context. With a relational leadership view, the context unites with the other elements: the system interacts with and shapes the environment, while the environment interacts with and shapes the system. Knowledge, learning, meaning, and outcomes are not within the leader, but are situated in and constructed in the coordinated interactions of the group and its context. The practices are all interactions, and therefore exist in that space between participants, and between participants and context. Reviewing the five practices, I could see that I had generalized them as representing a set of coordinated actions commonly incorporated across several groups. Although these were based on

clusters of narratives from participants, the specific actions and narratives of each group were unique to that group and their context.

The third theme I noticed was the shift _from fixed to dynamic_. More traditional practices of leadership seem eager to create what is fixed or stable: structures, hierarchies, roles, processes, procedures, customer responses, supplier contracts, and more. In contrast, taking the relational, systems view of leadership is to embrace the dynamic. Complex adaptive systems are most creative when there is entropy and disequilibrium. Operating on the edge of chaos, they adapt, become more complex in their behavior in order to have a better fit with the environment, and this adaptation is neither predictable nor controllable. Reviewing the five practices, I could see that each one held a dynamic element. For example, throughout the action learning project, relationships were changing, roles were changing, responsible tasks were changing, goals were changing, ways of meaning making were changing, and the solution was changing.

Implications for Practice and Development

A social constructionist stance foregrounds action. Therefore, rather than emphasizing the cognitive aspects of relational leadership, I wanted to emphasize the interactions themselves-- to privilege practical application rather than theory. After being immersed in these interactions for three years, I would like to offer some implications for the way we develop this re-framed leadership as a relational, collective capacity in organizations.

Most of today's approaches to developing leadership focus on improving specific competencies of the individual, without addressing the capacity of the collective, and with little consideration of the context. However, if we recognize and frame leadership in the context of relational practices, then we must move beyond the simple episodic event-based approach to leadership development. The relationships and interactions that construct leadership cannot suddenly appear in a weekend retreat, they must be nurtured over time, and within the context of business interactions.

Leadership is not an individual act, it is a collective performance. Yet most development programs are designed around standardized individual leader competencies rather than the collective issues presently facing the organization. Development must seek to produce organizational capacity, rather than star individual performers.

Development cannot be separate from the business; it must be a context-situated practice of actions, leading to greater perspective and understanding. Leadership is not something done apart from the everyday work of the participants; the construction of leadership is not an academic or theoretical activity -- it is the work of the participants. Therefore development must be application-oriented, geared to enterprise challenges, allowing learning to occur as a part of the ongoing performance of leadership – building leadership capacity while making progress toward critical objectives.

Taken together, the systems and relational leadership theories, along with the relational practices discussed earlier, suggest a number of implications for how organizations might structure and implement work on key initiatives. One is that organizations will want to ensure a highly diverse mix of participants on any endeavor. Increasing diversity in the team increases the possibilities for more novel outcomes. Another implication is that organizations may want communities of participants to become more self-selecting. If employees are treated more as independent agents, they will choose to cluster around the projects that hold most meaningful purpose for them. Another implication involves letting go of formal structures and hierarchies in these communities, allowing them to weave new webs of relationship and to self-organize through the interactive practices they construct, all in service of the whole.

For now it is hard to visualize an organization working in this manner, but little by little there are glimpses of these practices already happening. The prevalence of cross functional and virtual global teams speaks to increasing diversity. The wider acceptance and success of Agile software development teams supports the concept of small, self-organizing work groups and communities focused on common purpose. Voluntary action learning teams are gaining momentum, not only as a context-embedded leadership

development process, but also as a viable means of creating innovative results against wicked problems.

As we move ahead into the 21st century, my hope is to continue to advocate for a more relational approach to leadership, and to help organizations implement – even if only stepwise – the programs and practices to support this more collective and relational construction of leadership.

Significance, Limitations, and Further Research

Positivists, or those with a realist orientation, might say that leadership can be precisely defined. Constructionists, with an intersubjective orientation, think that leadership is given meaning by those who construct it, within their particular interactions and context. Constructionist researchers, myself included, hope to explore the new meaning given to leadership in the specific context within which it emerges.

As a constructionist, I would not position what I write here as yet another grand narrative or theory of leadership in the traditional academic sense. Instead, I offer what appeared to me (and my participant co-researchers) to be the rich points of our conversations and narratives – the words and co-actions that seemed to carry significance and make a difference. I was not seeking to define leadership, but instead to deconstruct it and allow the groups to reconstruct it – hopefully in a way which provided them with new, generative pathways for action that were not previously available.

Relational leadership is constructed and given meaning within a context. I was immersed in 29 different contexts, and have attempted to draw some generalizations, even at the moment when I was writing that each context is unique. The groups I observed were fairly consistent in that they were all action learning teams, all drawn from within large US-based commercial enterprises, and all followed a lightly bounded process within the LEAD program. While I propose that the practices I have described are useful examples,

each community will construct leadership in its own way, and develop its own unique practices.

There are a number of additional research projects that could proceed from here. Future researchers may wish to construct studies on communities other than action learning teams and then compare the practices that emerge with these. Another study could focus on observing interactions within a community that naturally has a high-context, relational culture, such as a Japanese team. Yet another idea is a longer longitudinal study, following the community as they move from the context of a loosely-bounded action learning team back into the broader community and context of their organizational roles.

My hope for significance is that this study contributes to the literature by providing insight on the practices and specific narratives of groups in an action learning context as they pursued coordinated action and constructed meaning for relational leadership.

My additional hope is that, as words create worlds, contributing to the conversation of relational leadership helps to create and construct it more broadly in the world, toward positive outcomes.

APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

(semi-structured; selected from the following)

A. Tell me about your background, present role, title, and functional expertise.

B. In what ways have you experienced business becoming more volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, or fast-changing in recent years?

C. What are some of the key factors driving the move toward complexity in your business/industry? Comment especially on emerging markets, globalization, growth, shifts in regulatory environment, risk, talent, technology and communication….

D. In what ways is leadership in your organization moving away from the more traditional individual command-and-control focus to become more shared and collaborative?

E. Is there still a role for individual leaders based on expertise, authority, functional boundaries, and so forth? What is that role?

F. What value does a leader role bring to a team? How is this value visible/perceivable? More specifically, how does the leader shape task; how do they build relationships?

G. Beyond the role of an individual, where does "leadership" exist within a team? How does leadership emerge, how is it shared among several people? How is knowledge and expertise also distributed and shared? Is it "situated" within specific expert team members, across all team members, or somehow stored in a repository?

[REGARDING THE ACTION LEARNING PROJECT TEAM]

H. How did your team get started? Did you intentionally select or not select an individual leader? Why or why not? How did you set direction and gain momentum?

I. Tell me about a key moment when your team struggled, faced an obstacle, or got stuck, and then found its way forward and started making progress again. What were the specific behaviors, and from whom, that enabled progress? How did your team adapt its processes, structures, or outcome/goals to overcome key challenges?

J. What are the biggest obstacles you faced, as a diverse and distributed team? As a team wrestling with an ambiguous problem, in a complex, interconnected environment? What collective actions were most helpful in that environment?

K. When someone proposed a direction, ideas, or solution, were others willing to follow (without a sense of formal authority)? Collectively, how did you shape the vision and a set of shared goals? Was there often a need to change or adapt that goal (or smaller milestones) along the way? How was that done?

L. In what ways did the group learn to think together, to share and analyze information even though the expertise is widely distributed in the team? How did you collectively make sense of data and come to agreement on its meaning? How did you take advantage of team diversity to achieve this?

M. What behaviors were most effective in enabling a collaborative inter-action? How did collaboration contribute to overall team performance?

N. As you have developed and grown through experience, what have been some of your key insights? In what ways are you now better equipped to deal with complex issues? To manage teams in a complex environment?

O. What have you learned about leading in a complex environment? What adaptations will you continue to make to your 'self,' your processes, and your goals as you apply this experience to your everyday work?

The Written Narratives / Surveys

We were also able to conduct a written survey. The written narratives from these surveys, contributed by 80 respondents, represented 17 teams, from 2010 to 2013.

<u>Narrative Questions</u>

Two questions were asked of participants when they were surveyed.

The first question was asked as they concluded Sessions I and II, as well as their Action Learning project.

> *"What do you recall from the Sessions or from the Action Learning project (content, insights, key learning, feelings, thoughts) that was most significant for you?"*

The second question focused more on their application of this learning to projects and/or to their job roles.

> *"What have you done with what you have learned? How have you applied the content, tools, personal insight, or coaching? With whom and with what impact?"*

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