

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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Relational Leading: New Lenses for Co-creating Our Future

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When I first read about ‘relational leadership’ in my PhD research, I recognized words that resonated deeply. As an organization development practitioner, my focus has been to understand the systemic and collective processes that support effective results for my clients. I had an uneasy, if not downright hostile relationship with the term ‘leadership’. It was a term that conjured images of the ‘in charge’, ‘power-over’ individual who leads through command and control.

Today’s complex and global conditions have made transparent the limitations of that old view of leadership. Thorny social and environmental problems cross hierarchies and resist individualistic solutions. And yet our deeply held assumptions of heroic and bounded individual leadership continue to shape our organization structures, systems, and processes.

“Relational leading” names something fundamentally different for me. ‘Relational’ is about connections, what happens ‘in between’. Moving from ‘leadership’ to ‘leading’ is a shift from noun to verb, from person to action. It evokes connection and collaboration. Underneath, there is an even deeper shift; from a worldview that is about knowing and controlling to the processes for collectively co-creating a better future, together. I am intrigued by how we can expand our images of leading, and what that might look like in action. Here are five new lenses for describing leading as a relational act that I’ve been researching and a few examples from my work for how the practices might look in action:

Distributing Influence: Leading includes a collection of varied tasks and behaviors that collectively enable a team or group to achieve their goals, i.e. visioning, organizing, nurturing, strategizing and integrating. Rather than seeing these as centralized in an individual (i.e. leadership “competencies”), these are activities that occur in a flow of various contexts throughout a team and organization. How can we strengthen this distribution of leadership throughout the organization? By seeing, acknowledging and giving credit to many different types of leadership work? A creative team I work with lost their director and were invited to temporarily self-manage their work as a team. By identifying, sharing and rewarding the leadership work throughout the team, plans to replace the leader have been indefinitely suspended and the team is getting excellent results on their own.

Facilitating Conversations: Leading can be viewed as helping others to lead themselves. How do we create a positive context in which commitment and accountability are nurtured? What questions do we need to ask ourselves? What conversations need to be convened? How do we encourage different perspectives to be shared? A leader in the organic food industry wanted to bring women leaders together to address the challenges facing the food system in North America. With a design team, we spent 9

months to frame a convening of 140 diverse leaders from across the sustainable food industry. A core focus question was developed: “How do we need to be together differently to create a healthy food system for our children and grandchildren?” Over three days together, the group engaged in a series of conversations that resulted in 7 provocative propositions for being together differently across sectors and how these propositions could be developed in their respective work projects.

Creating Meaning: Leading can be seen as a collective practice of meaning-making, through our discourse, our narratives, the stories we tell ourselves, and the images and symbols we maintain. Achieving coordinated and coherent action across diverse stakeholder groups cannot be mandated. It comes through creating a shared sense of meaning. Reflexive practices that support meaning-making can range in scope from a simple team meeting debrief to a multi-faceted process for organization culture change. One example of culture change occurred in a publishing organization whose staff was debilitated by conflict. We held a meeting to explore what was happening. They found an image for their conflict: organizational “ghosts” whose appearance was being fueled by triangulated conversations. By agreeing on and practicing new communication guidelines, they restored their culture to one of healthy disagreement within one year.

Embrace Emergence: Leading can also be viewed as the conditions we create for embracing uncertainty and encouraging improvisation. These are strategies for seeing, reinforcing and disrupting organizational patterns. They include processes to surface differences, amplify what is working well, strengthen relational reciprocity and encourage and reward experiments. A board I worked with was bracing itself to get through a big decision in which they had deep differences. By first listening to each person’s view without debate, they surfaced the areas in which they had agreement, disagreement and the differing assumptions at play. From this clarity, they were able to identify information they needed and a process to come to consensus.

I invite you to add your lenses and practices to this beginning list. How might relational leading images and practices help us co-create better futures for our organizations, our communities and our planet?