

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

April 2015



Relational Leading

When Nothing Is but Everything Becomes

By Mette Vinther Larsen

Exploring leading, from a relational perspective enables us to build our understanding of leading in concordance with the nitty-gritty everyday practice within which leaders live their lives. Relational leading means acknowledging that we live our lives in one unique and co-constructed encounter after the next; encounters where we jointly in-situ generate knowledge that enables us to wayfare and improvise our way forward.

This stance toward leading is both liberating and at the same time can drive an otherwise sane leader, mad. It is liberating because leaders get to explore how they're thrown into a continually enmeshed, fluctuating and confluent world where everything comes into being "in the moment" as leaders jointly attempt to make sense of the organizational challenges in which they are immersed. They see their attempts to initiate actions as contextually and relationally sensitive in their desire to find sensible and reasonable ways forward. It is within this taken for granted perspective that the world becomes a collage of equal but different views....a world of multiplicity. It is a way that no-one, not even leaders, are capable of anticipating or predicting.

Leading from this perspective is an invitation to alter one's mindset. An invitation to focus on the present and engage in every encounter with curiosity to jointly figure out what is meaningful right now and how to proceed. A leader in one of my master's projects wrote, *"For the first time, as a leader in this organization, I was actually curious to figure out what she [a department leader who often questioned the speaker's decisions] thought and what ideas she had."* A change in communication enables other ways for leading.

Embracing this change in mindset is often challenging because you suddenly realize that you cannot **not** co-construct. You are always, with every gesture, word, utterance and action co-constructing. An MBA-student said while we were exploring a relational perspective on communication, *"When we perceive communication like this, it stops being a tool. It revolves around everything and all we do, and how on earth can we comprehend all this?"* A significant part of relational leading is to be able to acknowledge that we never can or will be able to comprehend everything – and we don't have to.

Everything flows and meshes and some of our dreams and ideas about the future will come true, others will vanish and new ones will appear dependent on how meaning is being constructed and actions initiated in the multiple, unique encounters that will take place from here until there. As a leader, you only take part in a few of these. Understanding this is not challenging, but practicing it is.

A leader with whom I discuss strategizing said: *“I’m not sure I’m able to handle this way of working, bottom-up, with strategy. I’ll have no idea where we end up.”* The challenge with grasping that none of us know what the future will bring is that the leaders also have to include themselves in the group of not-knowers. They also have to wayfare, improvise and as Sheila McNamee writes; *“... give wings to the imaginative...”* and let go of knowing where to go.

Furthermore, and this is where we sometimes feel that the otherwise sane leaders are on the verge of going mad, they have to, at least sometimes, co-construct knowledge and figure out what in-situ is reasonable and sensible with those who are not their significant others. Sometimes the most interesting, reflexive and imaginative co-constructions arise out of un-adjusted and unanticipated responses, not from agreeing. When discussion starts, some leaders look a little bewildered. *Are we really serious here? Isn’t it too time-consuming and difficult? Can’t they just keep communicating with the people they know and who think alike?* Of course they can. But then they might also continue to co-construct the organizational challenges they are trying to alter. They may well repeat the same old patterns.

If leaders want to deal with the organizational challenges they’re in the middle of, they’ve got to embrace that they always co-construct with others, including the ones who perceive the organization differently than they do. Then the bewilderment increases a little and they say things like, *“This isn’t easy. I thought we were just going to chit chat a little. Does it really matter so much who I talk with?”* And yes it does, it might only be words, but words construct worlds and this is one of the both intriguing and startling aspects of relational leading.

Visit Dr. Larsen’s webpage. [Click here.](#)

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