Whitehead and Bakhtin: A process conceptualization of leadership

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Abstract

This paper develops an understanding of leadership beyond the common focus on an individual leader towards a more thoroughgoing process-relational conceptualization of leaderfulness. To do this, it argues that even contemporary positions within management and organization studies regarding process as allowing a focus on inter-actions rather than the analysis of self-standing actions miss-state the fundamental premises of process metaphysics. To overcome the limitations of the management and organisation studies canon in this regard, the paper uses the work of two process philosophers, Whitehead and Bakhtin, as well as other applied process thinkers such as the theologians Cobb and Griffin, process biologists and physicists such as Delafield-Butt and Phipps, and process sociologists such as Carolan and Halewood, versed in the original process metaphysical discourse, to rethink leadership as process. It applies an understanding or reciprocity and containment in the development of leaderful behaviour to a case study of NASA’s ‘Leadership Alchemy Programme’, and concludes that leadership is better understood as emergent, even, transient, a spontaneous self-organizing activity, where (as with physical nature itself) no prior assumption regarding its existence need necessarily be made or prescribed at the start, but rather where it is internally generated as an inherent feature of organizational life. The individual leader is thus a lure for that leaderful experience that individual others, in the reality of their self-determination can choose to bring into their becoming. As a result, the paper concludes by arguing that change, as a manifestation of leadership in organizations, is no longer understood as externally imposed, but immanently produced.

It isn’t ‘Being is’, Mark. It is ‘ising be.’ And it is not ‘Subject. Object’, either. It is subject in object, object in subject. Ying yang, S in O.
The subject subjects to its objectification. The object objects to its subjectification. But it is, ultimately, subjected to it [by the actual occasion in its concrescence].

Robert Chia, in conversation, Stirling 1996

Introduction

A very recent workshop having the newly-minted acronym PROS (PRocess Organization Studies; AJM call for papers), persists with the argument that in process thought a ‘focus on inter-actions is preferred to analyzing self-standing actions’ (Hernes, Maitlis and Tsoukas 2009; original emphasis). Such a view arises through:

several strands in organization studies [that] have adopted a more or less process-oriented perspective over the years. Karl Weick’s persistent emphasis on organizing and the important role of sensemaking in it is perhaps the best known process approach that has inspired several organizational researchers. Henry Mintzberg’s, James March’s, Andrew Pettigrew’s, and Andrew Van de Ven’s early work on the making of strategy, decision making, organizational change, and innovation respectively also shows an awareness of the importance of process-related issues. Current studies that take an explicitly performative (or enactivist, or relational) view of organizations focusing on, for example, routines, trust, innovation and change, strategizing, naturalistic decision making, learning and knowing, communication, sensemaking, and the enactment of technological change in organizations have similarly adopted, to varying degrees, a process vocabulary, and have further refined a process sensibility. Indeed, the growing use of the gerund (-ing) indicates the desire to move towards dynamic ways of understanding organizational phenomena, especially in a fast-moving, inter-connected, globalized world (ibid.).

We would not disagree with the management studies background to process thinking that Hernes et al articulate, nor indeed would we deny the relevance and importance of Chia’s well-established focus on the
–ing gerund to avoid the paused, stabilized implications of nouns in the English language. Nonetheless, despite twenty years of writing in management studies explicitly utilizing the ideas of process philosophers, such as Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead, the field remains almost obstinately ignorant of core process metaphysical principles. This has apparently arisen as a result of later philosophers either rejecting or disregarding them (Hernes, 2007). Such rejections are manifest throughout mainstream philosophy, and are perhaps best exemplified by Scruton’s dismissive summary, in which he suggests we would perhaps all be better off spared from process metaphysics altogether (1996: 372-5).

Such views are the result of a complete miscomprehension. The philosopher and theologian John B. Cobb Jr – the preeminent process thinker of our times – has recently suggested that those who struggle to properly understand process metaphysics (2008):

[s]ometimes suppose the problem is simply that [Whitehead] chose to express himself in a difficult technical language. They think that all that is necessary is to translate this language into one they already understand. This is a serious error. No deeply original thinking can be expressed adequately in existing language… One cannot translate the new vision into the vocabulary of the old… In the past, it has been generally recognized that very few can fruitfully study [Whitehead’s magnum opus] Process and Reality on their own… I have personally discouraged people, including philosophers, from reading [it] by themselves… Coming to an understanding of this book has been a collective task of students over two generations. One needs to study it first with a guide who has benefited from this collective work.

In reviewing process metaphysics in organisation studies, we are aware of, first, the very limited use of the original work of process philosophers, as opposed to secondary citation. And second, with the exception of Rescher’s excellent but elementary Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy (1996) which has become the base cit3, absolutely no use whatsoever of the considerable body of secondary work that has been written to support it (Dibben, 2008; see for example Sherburne 1966, Cobb and Griffin 1976, Griffin 1998, Keller and Daniel 2002, and more recently Griffin 2008, Gunter 2008, Mesle 2008 and Weber and Desmond 2008). Even although this may be the result of a self-evident reticence to engage with theology4, it is little wonder that writers in management studies have so far failed to grasp (at least in print) anything beyond the most simplistic of process philosophical concepts: There is little beyond a focus on the apparent inter-connectedness of external relations and the impact of those on individuals (Dibben, 2009). In brief, the error can be resolved with the recognition that it is not the inter-connectedness of external relations that matters, so much as the intra-connectedness of internal relations; Whitehead’s metaphysics, at least, is an extended solution to the mind-body problem (Griffin, 1998). With this view, we must even contend with Hernes et al’s suggestion, above, that a ‘focus on inter-actions is preferred to analyzing self-standing actions’. Rather, we must properly understand just exactly what is going on in apparently ‘self-standing’ actions. Thus, a focus on intra-actions is preferable to analyzing inter-actions. The question is what do we mean by intra-actions?

In this paper we shall attempt to address this question by considering the phenomenon of leadership. We shall rely for the most part on the work of Martin Wood, but shall look to extend his process articulations through recent advances in ‘Applied Process Thought’ (Dibben and Newton, 2009) to consider a panexperientialist examination of containment and reciprocity, propositions and societies of occasions of experience in an infinite and open universe. To do this, we shall rely for the most part not on management scholars but on the process philosophers A.N. Whitehead (1861 – 1947) and M.M. Bakhtin (1895 – 1975),

2 cf. Japanese, whose nouns are not so rigidly passive; to turn a noun into a negative, one renders it into a verbal – a noun that behaves like a verb. It is no coincidence that Japanese scholars have made far more of process thought in recent years than their British counterparts (see for example the remarkably busy Japan Society for Process Studies; http://whitehead-japan.com)
3 Perhaps interestingly, and unlike other introductory expositions such as those listed here, this particular Rescher volume is in fact very rarely cited by process philosophers...
4 The lineage of this secondary literature comes from Whitehead via his doctoral student the theologian Charles Hartshorne – who extended Whitehead’s rendering of God in Process and Reality to form an entirely new theology now recognised within Religion as ‘process theology – and thence to his student John Cobb, thence to his Griffin, and so on. However, as we shall see, a theological understanding of just exactly what God may be is quite different from lay understandings which are the manifest source of the reticence we see in management scholars for engaging with the literature.
as well as (Whiteheadian) process scholars of (e.g.) theology, biology, physics and sociology, to argue that leadership may be best understood in terms of self-organizing patterns of relationships that have an intrinsic value characterisable as leaderful. We shall conclude by considering the NASA’s Leadership Alchemy Program to see whether this may exhibit aspects that might be describable as genuinely process-oriented. We should begin, however, with a brief rendering of what leadership is standardly taken to mean in Organisation Studies, and who engages in it.

Martin Wood on Leadership

Contemporary understanding of leadership retains a focus on individuals as single-handed heroes of change; leadership is an act of the individual. The extant literature appears to be largely based on a Cartesian emphasis. There is a sort dualism that separates res cogitans (awareness of the leader) from res extensa (practice of traits and leadership styles). Much of our extant knowledge on the practice of leadership is generally predicated on the leader exhibiting desired traits largely stable in time and space, rather than the on-going and changing experience involved in the practice of leading. In this sense, leaders are talismanic figureheads, supervenient over the organization, who engage in meaningful interactions to drive their vision of the future. In this sense they are rather akin to the pagan understanding of a god, a permanent independent fixture in which knowledge of and power over the ‘world’ is concentrated. Legend has it that after Apple’s failed transition from dot-Mac to mobile-Me webmail in 2007, Steve Jobs – the founder and indeed talismanic figurehead of Apple – travelled the corridors of the company looking for people to ‘flame’; a quite remarkable image is conjured up.

A process understanding would suggest something rather more complicated might be afoot. A process perspective of leadership has the potential to produce new ways for rethinking motion and process as the leader comes to relate to a member and as a member comes to relate to the leader – a relational act where meaning is generated without a stop. As Holquist and Liapunov (in Bakhtin, 1990: xli) remind us there is benefit in saying to oneself that “to be human is to mean” and that the "human being is the production of meaning" — that is where leadership as a never-ending process could be clearly implicated. One scholar who has recently recognised this problem with contemporary understanding of leaders is Martin Wood. He suggests we standardly see leaders as people who:

impress others; inspire people; push through transformations; get the job done; have compelling, even gripping, visions; stir enthusiasm; and have personal magnetism… Thus, leaders are seen as Prime Movers rather than as emergent phenomena within leaderful situations. Such identity-locating attributes turn out to be more prescriptive than descriptive, however. Managers may well need to do these things, but simply doing them does not privilege them as ‘leader’ nor as someone who can be the cause of ‘leadership’. Such prescriptions simplify and may not be the most appropriate units of analysis within new and ‘virtual’ modes of organizing, whose speed, simultaneity and interconnectivity are now forcing a new kind of encounter with the phenomenon of leadership (2005a: 1103).

For Wood, this new encounter requires us to grapple with the question of how to move comprehensively beyond discussions of external relatedness in management and organisation studies. He argues discussion of leadership should not be directed toward distinguishing a state, but rather “toward the identification of an essential movement, in which what endures is internal qualitative difference: the being-itself of difference, and not the sameness of identity. The idea of simple, objective location has gone and the relation as a thing itself is brought to the fore” (2005a; also 2005b and 2003). In this way, Wood extends the standard use of Whitehead’s Misplaced Concreteness beyond a straightforward explanation of the primacy of process to which addresses directly the problem of contemporary process discourses in the field, discourses that retain the static understanding of ‘self-identical individualism and discrete relatedness, and thereby leave ‘the relation external to the related’ (Wood, 2005a). Wood is perhaps alone among his contemporaries, therefore, in genuinely rising to the challenge of focusing on processes rather than things. In so doing, he argues leadership is ‘going on within a subtle synthesis of internal differences without mediation or relation to others.’ The ‘essence’ of leadership is thus more accurately seen as ‘the accelerating pace (and shrinking space) of relations of movement and rest, speed, slowness and simultaneity.’ This, as opposed to a ‘self-evident [and] particular leadership figure construed as a ‘simple element, present at hand…”’ (2005b: 285).
In this rendering of leadership, Wood shows hitherto partial expressions of process in the management field lack the capacity to articulate a sense of the managerial experience as ‘the subtle synthesis of internal forces that are always qualitatively relating through their difference’ (2005a). As a result of this analysis of the impact of internal as well as external relations on the managerial phenomenon of leadership, Wood argues that management research must pay attention not to quasi-scientific neo-empiricism but rather to ‘the withdrawn or background processes of individuation,’ accessing the ‘mise en scène through the deployment of qualitative, interpretive and ethnographic research’ (2005b: 287). If it is to grapple fully with the implications of a process ontology, therefore, the field should investigate ‘how perpetual movement and divergent processes form a discrete body, or appear to obtain in a substantial set of individual qualities and capabilities, at the same time as preserving the uninterrupted continuity of our experience’ (Wood, 2005b: 287). In essence, this is the purpose of our present work. We will proceed with a discussion of a ‘discrete body’, then to a discussion of ‘individuality’ and thence to a discussion of the nature of experience. We will attempt to tie this together in terms of its implications for leadership through a discussion of the development of meaning.

Michael Halewood on Nature as Sociality

To deal first with the question of the ‘discrete body’, we have seen previously that an organization can be meaningfully considered in process terms as an event field since the production of social continuity is a function of the transmission of its defining characteristic, and there is a relation between a society and its own interstices, between continuity and the production of the individual entity as causa sui, deciding how it will appropriate what its social environment proposes (Dibben, 2009). As such organisations ‘take on a complex and nuanced character with a claim to reality of a subjective unity’ (Moore, 2009) that appears akin to living entities. For Moore (2009), they are neither wholly material nor conceptual, but a centre generating advance into novelty in that they mediate the way reality becomes. For this to be so, they must exhibit a causality independent of human cognition. As a society, the organization endures not because the entities that make it up conform to a specific pattern, type or ideal (Halewood, 2009; also Halewood and Michael, 2008). Rather, the defining essence of these entities endures in the present so long as they retain a mutuality of objective immortality in the past describable as a social environment:

Every actual entity is in its nature essentially social, and this is in two ways: First, the outlines of its own character are determined by the data which its environment provides for its process of feeling. Secondly, these data are not extrinsic to the entity; they constitute that display of the universe which is inherent in the entity. (Whitehead, [1929] 1978: 203).

As such, for process thought, sociality is not something which is added-on epistemically after the fact, it is ontologically the necessary element for existence. In this way, as the Sociologist Michael Halewood argues, sociality is implicit within all existence and is not limited to the human level. One thing must partake of other things to be constituted as individual. To be recognizable as an individual is to be in-divisible from the society of which we are a part except to the extent that the occasion turns the prior experience of its society of occasions to its own use, in the realization of its own immediate actuality.

Ron Phipps and John Cobb on Individuality and the Bifurcation of Physical Nature

The question of individuality and the freedom inherent in the choice an entity has, to make what it will of the environment it prehends in its coming into being leads us to a core problematic in Western philosophy. How might it be that an entity of any kind can choose? Whitehead’s solution to this question lies in his rejection of the Western cosmology, as epitomised in Hume, Kant, Locke, Newton and Descartes, that has dominated the sciences. The bifurcation of nature in the mind-matter distinction brought about by the still-dominant Western cosmology creates an incomprehensible void between that which knows and that which is to be known. “All modern epistemologies, all modern cosmologies, wrestle with this problem. There is, for their doctrine, a mysterious reality in the background, intrinsically unknowable by any direct intercourse” (Whitehead 1967: 133). As Carolan notes (2009), this unbridgeable impasse poses two questions. First, how is it that the knower and known—which supposedly exist in different worlds—still interact? Second, what connects ‘mind’ and ‘matter’?
Even moving beyond the mind-matter bifurcation towards Physics’ more contemporary understanding of matter as energy does not entirely resolve the problem for, as the Theologian John Cobb (2009) notes, modern Science is still affected by its materialist past:

In the first place, “energy” does not denote an inert lump of stuff that is pushed and pulled by other inert lumps of stuff. It denotes rather an activity. To think of energy as the basic “matter” of the universe, one must conceive the universe as consisting in events rather than inert objects enduring unchanged through time. Since “events” already play a considerable role in the writings of physicists, this should be possible, but it will require deep changes in the mental habits of scientists. Many of their concepts and patterns of thought are still shaped by materialism.

Events, as bursts of energy, are very different in their nature from the way material “atoms” have been conceived. They are doubly active in receiving from the past and transmitting to the future. As events they also momentarily exist in themselves. In physical terms there is scalar energy as well as vector energy (Cobb, 2009).

Understanding the physical world as made up of events that have energy allows the gap between mind and matter to be more easily bridged. If events receive, embody, and transmit energy then subjective experience is just precisely that receiving, embodying, and transmitting. Rendered in human terms, therefore, a moment of human experience receives energy and information from previous instances of human experience through neuronal events, and transmits energy and information to future instances of human experience through other neuronal events. In this way, the implications of evolutionary thinking in which human beings are fully a part of nature can be applied more completely, to include subjectivity not as supervenient or as an epiphenomenon but as an inherent and indeed vital part of the energizing process of nature. Whitehead’s process metaphysics is just precisely an ‘extended solution’ (Griffin, 1998) to, shall we say, Darwin’s mind-body problem.

Whitehead’s solution to the mind-body problem inherent within evolution by natural selection leads us also to rethink not just biological nature but physical nature as well. We have argued elsewhere that reality is, ultimately, not about the identification of isolated individuals through externality but related individuals through internality, which is to say that quantum phenomena are internally generated as an inherent feature of an experientially becoming reality through the provocation of some special activity within the immediate quantum occasion where no prior assumption regarding its existence is made or prescribed at the start. As such, and as the Physicist Ron Phipps (2009) notes, process physics emphasizes a freedom of causality that in most occasions of experience is a transmission of feeling from one moment to the next, bringing about a ‘causal orderliness amid qualitative variety’ of potentiality. This is the opposite of reductionism’s suppression of qualitative variety to qualitative sameness of constituents within immense geometric variety’. As we have already noted, ‘it is also a counterpoint to the rigid strict, mechanistic determinism characteristic of much of the Western philosophic and scientific traditions’ (ibid), which afforded little or no place for spontaneity, openness, freedom, teleology or value in its philosophic perspective. Causal orderliness provides the fabric of reality through which both teleological behavior and freedom are purposeful rather than chaotic, and in which intrinsic qualitative differentiation and variety have primacy over sameness and mere geometric variety. But how might freedom of causality brought about by ‘the transmission of feeling from one moment to the next’ be experienced in nature?

Jonathan Delafield-Butt on Feelings in Biological Nature

For the biologist Jonathan Delafield-Butt (2009; see also 2008 and Stein 2008, 2009), experience is central to all life; an organism is a feeling feeling feeling (subject, transitive verb object). The “lure for feeling is the germ of mind” (PR 85 [131]):

If ‘feeling feeling feeling’ is at the heart of the material processes of life, then this must share common principles reflected throughout biological organization that have evolved to give different expressions of the same fundamental process. [This is perhaps most keenly appreciated in] the different anatomical or genetic arrangements [that] have evolved to serve specific purposes in specific contexts yet have developed from a common root to serve the basic life processes of the organism. If feelings operate not only in human relations, but are ubiquitously present in all relations between ‘organisms’, then some of the same feelings that structure and shape our human relations may also be present in the structuring and shaping of biological systems generally. [For Birch, 1995; ]these feelings, common to nature and to man,
must be fundamental feelings in our human experience of them and not just species-specific ones. In the case of a phospholipid bilayer – the cell wall – the containing lipid is less defined as an individual acting alone to contain as we might see a mother doing, and as is more observable as a component in a large sheet of dynamic relations. In this view, when the impact of high energy is felt by one part of the system, one lipid say, this experience is distributed over a sheet of hundreds of thousands of lipids. While this is observable, it occludes the fact that the distributions of energies comes back to the individual relations of, say, the impacted lipid and its neighbour. It is the arrangement of the lipids altogether that gives one the ability to be able to contain the up-swells of another. This core process-relational notion of ‘individual-in-community’ [see also Cobb, 2007] is an important fact not to be missed. For humans as well, it is our social distribution of containments and the distributions of energies that enables the one to contain the other. Isolated, each is bound to perish.

In an engagement between two intimate humans, feelings form their binding togetherness. These feelings are generated by, and generate ‘containment’ and ‘reciprocity’. They are based on contingencies of feeling between the two to form a fit that brings them together into a dyadic whole. Importantly, if this relation is capable of containment, then it is capable of enduring hardship and extremes of feeling. Containments and reciprocities are expressed in activity in the interaction, and so they manifest in a physical, bodily reality, but it is the containment and reciprocity of feeling that is the substance of the engagement and the driver of the activity... We have all experienced container-contained relationships and we all still live in them even in our so-called ‘independence’ as adults. This form of relating is particularly noticeable in intimate relationships where the contained and containing element is especially deep, but these relations also exist more superficially in our everyday engagements, too, and form looser dynamics of professional companionship and friendship.

One example of the development of such containments and reciprocities is language. The simplest ‘language’ may be found in the exchange between mother and child, which results in a shared coconsciousness that has at its core a feeling of satisfaction. As Stern (1990) notes:

Joy is the product of a mutual regulation of social exchange by both partners. Smiling back and forth is the prototypical example; it usually begins at a relatively low level of intensity. Each partner then progressively escalates – kicking the other into higher orbit, so to speak. The exchange occurs in overlapping waves, where the mother’s smile elicits the infant’s, reanimating her next smile at an even higher level, and so on. These overlapping waves build in intensity, until, most often, simultaneous mutual hilarity breaks out.

Mikhail Bakhtin on Prehension and the Co-Creation of Meaning through ‘Language’

For both Whitehead and also the Russian process philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986, 1990, 1993), meaning is a function of a growing relationality, as opposed to static agreement. Prehensions and meaning making are an unfinalisable process that requires people to be always conscious of becoming — while revealing oneself for another with the help of the other (1986:87). In this sense, an utterance has an ontological coloration based on a plurality of consciousness, one that cannot in principle be fitted within the bounds of a single consciousness. Bakhtin observed that: “Just as the body is formed initially in the mother’s womb (body), a person’s consciousness awakens wrapped in another’s consciousness” (1986: 138). Bakhtin noted that: “I live in a world of others’ words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others’ words” (1986: 143).

Any prehension is colored by a complex unity of forces, one centripetal (forces of meaning that unify utterances, tending towards the center) and the other centrifugal forces (forces of meaning that disturb, tending to flee the center). Bakhtin (1981: 272-273), writes of “the unifying, centralizing, centripetal forces of verbal ideological life,” to which are opposed “the centrifugal, stratifying forces” of everyday life. A centripetal force tends towards a uniformity and singularity of meaning (stable and persistent). It emphasizes the status quo and sameness—effectively reducing the ‘other’ to the selfsame and the familiar. In contrast, a centrifugal force is committed to ‘being with’ the other, even in the midst of tensions and conflicts between leaders and their followers.

A person does not necessarily arrive at the “meaning”; but continues to discover meanings as long as he or she interacts. That meaning comes from the “contact between the word and the concrete reality”, as that
reality is shaped and re-shaped through utterances (Bakhtin, 1986: 87). Through prehensions, whether in silence or through utterance, processes are revealed as dynamic, not static because a person has no choice but to ‘bring forth’ one process after the other. To experience the process, a person has to bring forth other selves, other people, and other actors. It is not only “I-for-myself” but also “I and the other”. Both the centripetal and the centrifugal are somewhat connected to each other. In his conceptualization of the Creative Impulse, Whitehead (1956: 13) shows that “connectedness is of the essence of all things” and that “It is of the essence of types, that they are connected… no fact is merely itself.” As such, the leader is conscious of his or her ‘becoming’ (I-for-myself), and yet he or she is willing to unite his or her selfhood with what is about to be composed, or produced through process.

The leader continues to develop new meanings from the contact between his or her subjective aspect and that of the concrete reality of the team. Such a perspective of surplus prehensions goes well beyond that of Weick’s (1995) notion of sensemaking treated as retrospective. It frees Weick’s notion of retrosensemaking into a process having the capacity for achieving a prospective foresight largely enriched through what the other has to say. It involves being conscious of oneself and at the same time being fully accepting of what is outside oneself. A surplus of prehensions helps people to foresee a new trait or a new aspect every time an utterance is made. People come to know more about what the ‘other’ holds in terms of expectations, desires, and aspirations. All this provides more opportunities for a sort of capability which manifests itself through social construction, by which things are enriched by foresights being brought to bear from more than one angle.

A surplus of sensemaking has important implications for understanding the way in which the leader could come to see the border that separates oneself from that of the members to reaching out to others. It produces a leadership capability that manifests itself through speech, and through which the act of leading and answerability are enriched by insights being brought to bear from more than one angle. It reverses the tendency to treat ‘sensemaking’ as being rendered as immutable and largely driven by what has occurred in the past. This means that being of the leader is treated as dependent on co-becoming through what “others” have to say; followership and leadership are, together, self-organising.

**NASA on Leadership Alchemy**

The leadership studies scholar Ron Riggio suggests that many of the cases of ‘followership’ that he examines (Riggio et al, 2008) are manifestations of just exactly this process of leaderful self-organising. One particularly striking example of this is to be found at NASA’s Goddard space flight centre (Williams, 2008). This program was initiated in direct response to the Columbia shuttle disaster, the inquiry into which found that NASA’s famous ‘can-do’ approach to research, development and deployment created a dangerous culture of invincibility that led to senior management failing to heed warnings of problems. ‘A principal of Leadership Alchemy is that what one focuses on, expands’ (Williams, 2008: 96). A further principal is that one’s way of being – how one embodies leadership and followership wisdom is predominant over what one knows (ibid: 98). As such, the goal of the program is to develop ‘forward thinking leaders’; Leadership Alchemy is an ontological approach to leadership ‘because it focuses on “our way of being” as distinct from “our way of doing”’ (ibid). As such, leadership presence is the awareness of one’s being in any given moment. Some of the elements of presence are one’s mood about the future, thoughts, body language, words, posture, energy levels and emotional state. The positive alignment and synergy of all these elements creates leadership presence (ibid: 99-100): Leadership Alchemy offers in-depth experiences in an experiential interactive format that enable individuals to embody profound sustainable change… Embodied wisdom is the kind of wisdom that lives in your entire being. It is constitutive of who you are and your authentic way of being... In evaluating the followership-leadership challenge, we found that it is essential to continue to cultivate and grow a robust community of support and practice... As such those on the program are encouraged to be Ambassadors of Positive Change. In Leadership Alchemy, participants learn to step back and reflect upon how they view the world – what biases, filters and conditioned tendencies they are using – and to decide whether these serve the future they wish to create for themselves and the organization. In doing so, they learn that life provides choice points and that the intentional life yields greater reward... This skill, which serves each individual incredibly well, is even more notable when outwardly focused on the organizational collective...
Leadership Alchemy people learn that in a healthy leader-follower dynamic, creating and maintaining trust is the coin of the realm, and not keeping promises undermines trust... By receiving “space to grow” and the support of a committed community, participants are transformed... willing to change the status quo (ibid: 100-105).

As opposed to a single nominated (or imposed) identifiable leader directing the activity of those individuals, much less inspiring them to a particular vision, Leadership Alchemy suggests that from a practical perspective self-organizing teams within companies engage in leading activity without a single identifiable leader. Rendered from the perspective of process biology (Delafield-Butt, 2009), [leadership] may now be seen as:

The mechanism by which the sympathy of an intimate other is able to [support] another during a crisis. When feelings become too much for one person, they can be contained by another. In this form of relating, the container [leader] is one who is able to accept and to accommodate the stresses and traumas experienced by the other, and the contained [follower] is the one with psychological extremes that cannot be ‘held’ by oneself, but must be somehow expelled. In a container-contained relationship, the expulsion of the extreme is then taken up and processed in a novel way unfamiliar to the expeller. This processing of the extremity is all important, because it shows the other how to cope with this apparently uncopable situation. In this way, the expeller [follower] brings back into himself the same energy originally expelled, but transformed [through their leaderful actions] into an acceptable new form.

In this alchemistic way, people (and perhaps most particularly in knowledge-intensive organizations where workers are experts in their fields) inspire themselves towards the future of the organization. A future that is infinite and open. As such, leading is about producing a culture of positive interaction – of containment and reciprocity – among individuals having a common goal. Individual leaders, if they are identifiable in these scenarios at all, are explicitly or implicitly elected by their peers through their momentary capability to ‘transform feelings into acceptable new forms’. As such, leadership – actively making sense of the uncopable – is something that is emergent, even, transient, a spontaneous self-organizing activity, where (as with physical nature itself – see Cobb, 2009 and Phipps, 2009 above), no prior assumption regarding its existence need necessarily be made or prescribed at the start, but rather where it is internally generated as an inherent feature of organizational life.

Conclusion

For God’s sake shut your eyes and consider how your experiences are arriving from the antecedent state of mind and body.


Studies of leadership often assume the ‘being’ of the person, whether leader or member, as stable and enduring (Jabri, 2005). The prevailing emphasis on the enduring and stable nature of traits has generated ways of treating leadership largely distant from the leadership as becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Much of our knowledge of leadership styles is based on activities such as influencing, enabling energizing, etc., and on leaders having primary attributes such as being visionary, charismatic, strong, healthy, etc. All this seems to have led to a motionless (dormant) conception of the act of leading, so much so that the prospect for ‘becomingness’, as inhering the act of leading, is inhibited. How leaders come to dwell on motion and process is left largely untouched. This situation is troubling — for it impedes leadership and the act of reaching to others from conceptions of life and becoming. Extending Martin Wood’s process understanding of leadership, we have sought to avoid the fallacy of understanding process thought through deconstructive postmodernism. This merely seeks to overcome “the modern world view through an anti-worldview [that] deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients for a worldview such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world and truth as correspondence” (Griffin, 1993). In contrast, process thought seeks to unify – in a constructive or revisionary postmodernism – scientific, aesthetic and religious institutions to provide a more complete rendering of our experience, as a result of its return to organicism through a creative synthesis of both pre-modern and modern truths and values that, crucially, brings with it an acceptance of non-sensory perception (Griffin, 1993; also Dibben, 2008: 139-40).
Through our study of NASA’s Leadership Alchemy program and its processual understanding of leadership, and our application of new understandings of containment and reciprocity in process biology and process physics enriched by Bakhtin’s understanding of the co-creation of meaning, we have shown that leadership can perhaps best be understood not simply as an decisive act of sensemaking, but in terms of self-organizing patterns of relationships that have an intrinsic value characterisable as leaderful. That is, leadership is the self-organizing process of streams of managerial experiences that provides a defining essence objectively distinguishable as leadership and only objectively identifiable as being the influence in abstraction of one leader. In this way, leadership is ultimately not about the identification of isolated individuals through externality (the standard view), but related personal experiences within individuals, a flow of momentary occurrences among many individuals. Further, the learning of leadership, as discussed in the Alchemy case above (stepping back, reflecting, deciding about the future they wish to create) and as part of a manager’s education, arises (as Dibben notes, 2008: 16) through [its] discernment as a subjective experience of ‘transition’ (Cobb and Griffin 1976, 14-15) from one moment of knowing to another. This knowing, as a momentary event, resides in one individual and to which the individual alone has direct access (Mead, 1934). Since knowledge is understood to be the ‘conscious discrimination of objects experienced... derived from, and verified by, direct intuitive observation’ (Whitehead, 1964: 176), learning also requires another individual or set of individuals as a stimulation for it (Dewey, 1938: 35-37). As such the learning experience of the individual ‘does not go on simply inside the person, […] but changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had’ (ibid: 39). Educative growth through learning is thus not simply a subjective function of direct personal reflection by the individual as a separate experience of self-as-was a moment ago (Mead, 1934) to which the self-as-now reacts. Rather, it has an objective character communicated in action towards others, the datum to which those others each respond. These responses, in their turn, are objective reflections of new subjective experiences of learning. In this way, the philosopher-manager educates (i.e. leads) others through his actions, which are a result of his own learning.

As such, and in sum, leadership is a social experience of re-creation, where its continuity is a function of the transmission of its defining characteristic through societies as res verae, within which each new occasion of experience makes a decision in its completion about just exactly how that defining characteristic is appropriated from the social environment into the unitary reality of its individual actuality, causa sui. The individual leader is thus a lure for that leaderful experience that individual others, in the reality of their self-determination can choose (or not; in which case the energy of the leader may be wasted, or even misused destructively) to bring into their becoming; the behavior of a ‘leader’ only has an intrinsic value characterisable as leaderful, and thus the leader is only ‘powerful’ when the follower responds by changing their behavior to act in the manner intended. In this way leadership is no longer understood as externally imposed, but immanently produced.

References


Dewey, J. (1938) Experience and Education. New York: Collier Books


