

# Making Leadership Development Developmental

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**Abstract:** For leadership development to be effective, it must also address the development of structures of consciousness. Practices aimed at the transformation of consciousness and used in a leadership course are described. Research using Q-methodology is presented. Preliminary interpretation of research results indicates one factor as having the most capacity in areas indicated by the literature as important. It also points to the effectiveness of the course processes of dialogue and reflection in developing consciousness.

## Introduction

Kegan and Lahey (2009) note that much of what is done under the name of leadership development is not actually developmental, but rather behavior training. Just as there are many levels of skill in a given field of endeavor, there are also many levels of internal growth. It is in this internal domain that adult constructivist developmental approaches are focused. McCauley, Drath, Palus, O'Connor & Baker (2006) highlight the use of these theories in relation to leadership and indicate a need for further research in understanding the possibilities this approach can bring to leadership development.

In this article, our purpose is to present preliminary research exploring how to further the effectiveness of leadership development by making it developmental. We describe core constructs of cognitive development and learning structures we implemented to cultivate leaders' cognitive development. Preliminary results from a Q methodology study are described to point towards early indications of success and future research directions. To begin, we will address our use of the term development.

## Structures of Consciousness

Day and Zaccaro (2004) note that focusing solely on structure (the external aspects) as the way to transform an organization is like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Organizational transformation requires personal transformation as well as attention to organizational systems. Kegan (1994) has shown that the implicit demands of our modern world are such that in order to be successful we are expected to evolve beyond what was previously held to be a "normal" adult consciousness. Two kinds of "operating systems" or *structures of consciousness* can be seen to be most prevalent in society today. Kegan describes the first as the socialized mind, where a person has their identity made up from and held by the social constructs that surround them. Here a person knows what is expected of them, however they do not notice how their goals and behavior are actually predetermined by significant others or cultural conditions. They are held by and subject to them.

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The second is the self-authoring mind, where a person develops a relationship to those social constructs and chooses among them to form their identity. They can thus choose to construct their experiences (differentiation) and make more interconnections among these (integration). When a person's operating system shifts to the self-authoring mind, the person begins to differentiate from the culturally accepted messages and asks, "What is *my* vision? What are *my* values? Who am I and what do I most want to do with my time in my life?" (Anderson 2005). The person is now acting in the world from his/her own internal compass; his/her own internal standards, and set of values that have been discerned out of all of the surrounding messages. The implicit expectation of our society is that we operate from this self-authoring mind. It is this structure of consciousness that is our focus for leadership development.

The challenges to this are seen all around us. While leadership literature commonly asks that we become reflective leaders capable of handling diversity and complexity, (e.g. Collins, 2001; Kegan, 1994; Senge, 1990) and participate in creating our desired future (Senge, Jaworski, Scharmer & Flowers, 2004), we more often tend to look for wrong kind of leadership (Heifetz, 1994). We call for someone with answers, strong decisions and a map of the future, someone who knows where we ought to be going and how to get there – in short, someone who can make hard problems simple. A consequence of this can be that it is easy to blame the situation on the leader when things are going badly, and thereby avoiding any personal responsibility. In reality, many of the challenges we face are not simple. They invite us to transform the structure of our consciousness away from relying on inappropriate expectations of authority towards leadership that will challenge us to face problems.

## **Transformative Practice**

So how can we facilitate this depth of transformation in a leadership development course? We begin by looking at the gap between espoused and theories in use (Argyris, 2004). Argyris notes that leaders may know what they want conceptually, but are not able or ready to embody the leadership behavior it takes to really create such a culture. Thus learning is needed to overcome this gap. He also says that this learning is not a matter of the right attitudes or motivation; it is a product of *the way people reason about* their own behavior, or their structure of consciousness.

In order to support such learning, we try to create a crucible (Bennis & Thomas, 2004) and draw leaders' attention to this gap between espoused and theories in use through the use of 360-degree feedback. (We use The Leadership Circle Profile (TLCP) for this). It focuses on the dimensions that reveal the relationship between internal motivating assumptions and patterns of action and measures the two primary leadership domains – reactive tendencies and creative competencies, which reflect Kegan's socialized and self-authoring structures of consciousness.

The next question is, once we identify the gaps between espoused and theories in use as areas of desired change, how do we go about supporting the leaders to make such changes? Will power is not sufficient. Kegan and Lahey (2009) draw on Heifetz's (1994) distinction between technical and adaptive challenges to show that technical problems require only that we use our will to apply known or straightforward solutions to solve them. On the other hand, adaptive problems require us to adapt the way we think about them in order to solve them. Kegan and Lahey show

that the best way to accomplish this is to allow such problems to *solve us*. Simply trying harder to solve such problems with will power draws attention to our inability to close the gap between what we genuinely, even passionately, *want* and what we are actually *able* to do. To facilitate such change, we need to suspend (Bohm, 1996) the normal habits of attention to allow for new insights to emerge.

For this, Kegan and Lahey (2009) have developed a structured process to overcome this issue, which they term our *immunity to change*. They describe a dynamic pattern of mental activity that tends to keep us exactly where we are, despite sincere, even passionate, intentions to change. They also show that simply changing behaviors, or making “New Year’s Resolutions,” will not lead to change either. They present an approach that can represent a third way of looking at change by unlocking our mental immune system’s grip on our perception so we have an opportunity to see it in action. To put the insights from this process into action, they describe ways to test the assumptions revealed in action. These tests facilitate a more complex structure of meaning making, enabling the process of developing a more self-authoring consciousness.

In our five day course (on *Leadership Development and Organizational Transformation*, within the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)’s Masters in Organizational Leadership program), we begin on day one by setting them up for taking TLCP. They come back a month later for two days and we start by debriefing their TLCP feedback. This gives the leaders a clear picture of any gaps between their self perception and how others experience them. We then have them identify one core issue from this they would like to work on. This leads into the immunity to change process. Through this process they uncover the big assumptions underlying the competing commitments holding their system of thought in place. These assumptions are beliefs that we assume to be true and then automatically and unconsciously inform and filter how we see reality. From these insights, we help them design a test of one of those assumptions to try out during the month before the last two days of class. This can take the form of having a conversation about their TLCP feedback with someone they work with, trying out a different behavior at work, or simply becoming aware of the impact of a certain behavior they have. All of this is then reflected upon for their final essay exam.

## **Research**

Here we present data coming from doctoral research done using Q-methodology, which is an empirical research method for the scientific study of human subjectivity, originally developed by Stephenson (1953) in the 1930’s and furthered through the work of Brown (1993). Q-methodology views subjectivity as a person’s communication of their point of view, which is anchored in self- or internal frame of reference. It gives researchers the possibility to investigate subjectivity systematically; to become aware of, uncover and give meaning to subjective experience about a particular theme. It includes a distinctive set of psychometric and operational principles that are combined with statistical applications of correlation and factor analysis techniques. This combination allows researchers to utilize an exact quantitative means for investigating subjectivity.

65 different leaders participated in this study. They represent different ages, genders and educational backgrounds with various leader positions in diverse businesses. 28 of them were participants in the course described above.

Four factors emerged from the statistical analysis. These factors have been initially interpreted here in relation to Beck and Cowan's (1996) Spiral Dynamics model of the evolution of structures of consciousness. They describe eight interweaving structures that unfold in a spiral manner, oscillating between individual and collective orientations. Interpreting the structures of consciousness of the four factors in this study, they fall within the middle range of this model.

Factor four can be viewed as rational and looking to experts and authorities to tell them what to do, believe etc. (In Beck and Cowan's color coding for the stages, factor four has significant amounts of blue). They point out that they are very rational and use time to reflect on that, they like structure both in work and learning situations, and do not necessarily look at change as bringing new possibilities.

Factor three is interpreted as being in transition between the rational expertise of factor 4 and the striving/achieving consciousness of factor two (blue/orange, in transition in Spiral Dynamics language). This interpretation comes from the impression in their responses of a feeling of uncertainty. They highlight that they wish they had even more courage and energy to say their meaning directly on questions at issue, and that they need good tools to cope with conflict. They also underline that they do not cope with conflict and peoples' resistance comfortably. They also feel that in situations with pressure they can experience changing their behavior according to others' expectations. They also recognize that e-mail, telephone calls and immediate basic things usually take away their time from long-term goals and good organizing. They experience that they have made themselves too available, and thus try to delegate and to get others to take more initiative. Something that also stands out with this factor is that they do not agree with the statement: *Especially challenging situations in life that I have reflected on developed me into the leader I am today*. All the other factors responded to this as being like themselves. This can be interpreted as they are in a transition and that they right now are overwhelmed. In over their heads as Kegan (1994) says. They see new perspectives and possibilities however they are not yet confident in them and their old limitations hold them back.

Factor two emerges as the achievers, (orange in Spiral Dynamics), their strength laying in seeing and meeting the customer's perspective and their needs. They feel they have the courage and energy to say their meaning directly on questions at issue. They emphasize learning through "real life" experiences over books and lectures as being important for them in shaping the leader they are today. As such, they feel that surprising events that are challenging may be the richest in learning. However, they also believe that leaders are born. Factor two does not emphasize that personal growth has so much importance as an element in leader development and growth. They feel it is important for leaders to have a good ability to get an overview and prioritize in different situations together with high work capacity. Factor two in this study is mostly men with economic or civil engineering education.

Factor one is characterized as the sensitive self, aware of postmodern complexity and diversity more than the others (high levels of green in Spiral Dynamics terms). They highlight

respecting and valuing all people with their diversity. Factor one is the only group in the study that highlights the statement that *workshops or gatherings, with for example role play, group experiences, reflection and dialog with others, have given me important contribution as a person and leader.* (Most of the respondents in factor one were also students in our leadership course. We hope to look deeper into the degree to which such leaders self selected into our course and/or the degree to which their experience in the course shaped their views and helped them value this factor). They underline also that coaching and mentoring is a part of their leadership style, that it is about giving everyone a possibility to discover and realize potential. They like open and creative meetings because they often give surprising results. They also, like factor four, reflect on the gap between vision and reality; however they do not feel they use the rational line of action more than the intuitive for this.

## Concluding Thoughts

In this article we set out to share some of our views on why we consider a developmental approach to be an important element in developing leadership capacity. We have also presented a preliminary interpretation of Q-methodology research results on leaders' views on what is important. It indicates that factor one displays the most development of cognitive complexity. That the majority of this factor was made up of leaders who had taken our course gives us an indication that our approach to making leadership development developmental shows promise. Next steps in this research involve learning more about how much our course contributes to development separate from students having this stage of development prior to our course, as well as how well such growth is sustained after the course.

To frame our orientation to this work we would like to draw on a common saying; *you can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink.* For us, transformative learning, or facilitating the development of structures of consciousness, is like drinking. We find ourselves teaching in an area that has for the most part been invisible to people – they don't think they really see the water we point to and even if they do catch a glimpse of it they don't even realize they are thirsty. We can guide leaders to opportunities for personal growth, but they have to take the opportunity and make the discoveries for themselves.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, leaders are called to be more reflective, authentic and capable of handling ever increasing diversity and complexity. These qualities are supported by the development of cognitive complexity. Thus making leadership development developmental is a worthwhile task. It is a matter of collaboratively building a "consciousness bridge," where the bridge builder must have an equal respect for both ends, creating a firm foundation on both sides of the chasm leaders will traverse. As our understanding of the factors in this study increases, we aim to use this information to create better bridges to students in a fuller range of structures of consciousness. Then we can invite leaders to join in constructing what they will gradually come to see as a bridge that they can choose to walk out on and eventually over.

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