

THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF “LEADERSHIP INSIGHT DIALOGUE”

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For the past decade I have been working with others in designing a powerful learning development method for leaders. My name for the approach is “Leadership Insight Dialogue”. The method does not rely primarily on lectures, or simulations or the psychological feedback instruments often favoured in other valuable approaches to leadership development. The method is based on a form of dialogue designed to lead to new and fresh insights into the nature of leadership. These insights are actionable – they have immediate implications for leaders and organizations but also can provide the foundation for long term sustainable change.

Only parts of our learning method are original – like Isaac Newton we have not only stood on the shoulders of the giants who have come before us, but in our case we have borrowed their binoculars too. However, “Leadership Insight Dialogue” is innovative and distinctively our own in the way that we have integrated this range of diverse learning elements. We integrate all seven elements into each session of the senior leadership program Leading for Strategic Success which we conduct for MBS–Mt Eliza Executive Education. The method is not just a way to develop leaders, but also a way to exercise leadership inside businesses and organisations in order for them to realize their purpose, execute their strategies and achieve their performance goals.

At the heart of our method is insight which leads to change. Insight is different from theoretical knowledge, although there is nothing like a good theory to foster it. Insight is based on a personal understanding related to one’s own experience. A learning approach based on insight not only helps a leader to re-examine their own work and life experiences, it also provides new experiences from which to derive new insights. Our entire approach is designed to maximize insight. “Leadership Insight Dialogue” (L.I.D) is all about taking the lid off the secrets to effective and fulfilling leadership.

1. Dialogue

Our approach to Dialogue is not the Socratic question and answer version. We treat the whole process as a dialogue. I use the term dialogue in its strict sense of speaking and listening, but also I use it more broadly to refer to how folks are

relating, communicating, problem solving and creating together. Speaking and listening are the main tools we use to influence how a group works together and gains insights into effective leadership. It has become hackneyed to refer to a learning journey, but that is exactly what happens for managers through the process and stages of dialogue. The dialogue transitions from its typical norm-based and positional forms to the more insight-rich reflective and generative forms, which occurs as a result of many small acts of leadership within the group.

In working with dialogue we pay equal attention to how individuals and groups are listening as well as speaking. In our highly verbal and cognitive culture, there is a tendency to notice speaking but not pay much attention to listening. In many ways listening is more powerful than speaking – it is what allows for speaking and it shapes what can and will be said. It is not only individuals who have ways of listening but whole groups also have ways of listening based on shared assumptions, expectations and norms.

Usually children are more present to life than adults and they are very good at hearing listening. They are also more willing to let us know when it is missing or we are faking it. We can all hear listening but as adults the practice of listening to listening has become an under-utilised skill. Listening has multiple layers of complexity and subtlety, and I have described these previously in my article “Could It Be As Simple As Listening”. In our work with leaders we pay a lot of attention to what they say and don’t say. We do this not just for its own sake but because it can reveal the nature and quality of their listening and we are actively attempting to influence the way they are listening in order to promote insight, change, collaboration, creativity and, of course, leadership. The way you influence how others are listening, ironically, is by continually shifting your own listening and through your own speaking and behaviour.

2. Group Processes

We have a strong focus on Group Processes and group dynamics because we consider that the work of leadership gets done in relationships. The relationship may be one-on-one or it might be the whole organisation. In a previous article “Leadership That Transforms Groups and Organisations” I have argued that the relationship between leaders and groups is both symbiotic (interdependent) and dialectic (bouncing off each other). This relationship is both licensing and constraining the work of leadership and change. Effective leaders pay a lot of attention to the “relational space” and are attempting to shape it all the time. Part of the work of influencing group dynamics is to bring them out of the background and make them visible to everyone.

Many approaches to leadership development tend to focus on individuals. Our focus is on the group, and the individual in the group. We treat the learning and the program group as a prototype to demonstrate how effective leadership mobilizes folks to achieve a collective purpose. One of the “aha moments” for many individuals on the program is when they fully realize the truth and depth of our proposition that the richness of their individual learning depends on how well the group works together. Group processes and one-on-one exercises dominate our learning method, ranging from group reflections, group-as-case reviews, group leadership consultations, group cultural exercises, group projects on futures thinking, to the only feedback instrument we use which is a workplace group survey. Participants report that the group leadership consultations are a practice that many take back to their management teams. The individual leader still gets lots of attention in our method, but it is remarkable given all this focus on the collective that managers regularly report that they experience a personal transformation.

3. Feedback

We use Feedback which has a strong focus on the here and now. In the words of Ron Heifetz we use whatever happens on the program as “grist for the mill” to provide live feedback to the managers. In particular, we use a modified version of group-as-case or case-in-point method to examine how the group is working together, to diagnose the various adaptive challenges facing the learning group, and to identify the leadership needed within the learning group to move it towards the achievement of its mission. This feedback is the source of some of the most challenging and uncomfortable moments on our program. We normally use just one workplace feedback instrument called Symlog which provides a theory about typical group dynamics and the leadership interventions required to help a group work well together and be successful. Symlog allows managers to benchmark themselves and their workplace management teams against the results of high performing groups and optimal leaders.

There is a wonderful paradox that arises from the individual and collective feedback mechanisms which we use as part of “Leadership Insight Dialogue”. Most senior managers learn that there are some concrete things that they could do differently to be more effective leaders. But at the same time, many also discover that they are considerably bigger and better than the criticisms and judgements which privately or covertly they have been levelling at themselves.

4. New Ideas

New Ideas are also a key element of our method. Our approach is content rich because we are aiming for new and fresh thinking about leadership. We approach

leadership at a macro strategic level, and at a micro level of moment to moment acts of leadership. Some of the freshness is achieved by leaders opening their minds when previously they may have been closed, and some of it is achieved by exposing them to new ideas, frameworks and theories. We present leaders with new ideas about leadership and learning, about change and change management, about teamwork, collaboration and culture, about futures thinking, creativity and strategy, about identity and mindfulness, and about the role of emotions, purpose, and values.

We focus on what I call the 3Cs of leadership work – Change, Collaboration and Creativity. My colleague Rob Burke introduces the very latest thinking about the Future and how to shape it. We ourselves have written extensively about all these topics and written about our experience and lessons working with other managers and organisations. We urge the managers not simply to believe these new ideas, but to experiment with them and to use the course to form and clarify their own explicit and robust view of leadership.

5. Reflection

Reflection is the process by which these new ideas and experiences are turned into insights. We have discovered from many years of work with senior managers that most of them simply do not make the time to reflect. They are too busy to reflect and they do not have reliable methods for reflecting. Time poor leaders who do not reflect are unlikely to learn much new however rich are their experiences or clever are the ideas that they encounter. We give a lot of attention and time to developing the habit of reflection and we introduce managers to a large range of individual and collective techniques for reflecting. Some of the reflection techniques which we use include lengthy group reflection sessions, journals, double loop learning, dance floor and balcony reviews, causal layered analysis, case-in-point and group-as-case reviews, consultations and buddy walks.

Participants regularly praise this aspect of our work and yet they report that despite their commitment and diligence they find continuing the practice of reflection is the greatest challenge for them after they return to their work environment. This is not an intellectual problem – it is about forming a new habit. We provide a range of reinforcement opportunities after a program to help consolidate new habits. Surprisingly, the new frontiers of neuroscience and the discovery of neuroplasticity are suggesting that the old rote methods used in teaching in the past may not have been good for promoting thinking and insight, but they may have been important in supporting habit formation. For this reason one of the structural changes many

managers make after our program is they separate out their issue-crunching business meetings and their more reflective leadership meetings.

6. Mindfulness

Mindfulness goes one step further than reflection. Reflection is based on thinking and feeling. Mindfulness is based on not thinking –suspending all the usual cogitation. In an academic environment “not thinking” can sound shocking, but only when it is confused with “never thinking”. Mindfulness is about paying attention on purpose but without the filter of all the usual judgements, evaluations, analysis and interpretation of the cognitive process. Listening to listening which I described earlier is a form of mindfulness. It is simply the act of bringing awareness to reality. This awareness can itself lead to profound new insights for leaders.

The insights available through the practice of mindfulness cannot be attained through mere reflection. In fact, the cognitive processes at the heart of reflection will block the highly valuable insights available through mindfulness. Participants report that not only do they slow down on our program, but mysteriously time itself appears to slow down and it seems like there is more of it available to get important things done. The practices of reflection and mindfulness can achieve this.

7. Reveal Ourselves

As part of our learning method we Reveal Ourselves a lot to the participants. We break one of the norms and rules for presenters. We do not stay theoretical or abstract or distant or above the fray. We engage in the same enquiry and share a lot about our own experiences, flaws, mistakes, successes and insights. Participants express a lot of appreciation for this and report that it makes a big difference to their learning. Why do we do it? One reason we do it is to demonstrate a key distinction which we want to make between being the Authority figure and exercising Leadership. We do it partly to ensure that we are being real and fully present ourselves on the program, partly to provide concrete examples of what we are explaining theoretically, and partly to open up the space and provide permission for others to explore issues and reveal more of themselves.

We have a general rule not to ask anyone to do anything that we are not willing to do ourselves. It takes a bit of courage and humility every time you reveal yourself and be vulnerable as a teacher and facilitator, but as long as you do not let yourself become the focus and hence supplant the learning, it can be very rewarding for everybody. My invitation to all leaders is to find more sophisticated and fulfilling ways of protecting their authority and exercising leadership and to stop hiding themselves behind a title, a role, an identity, or any other mask. Everybody would

be better off if those in influential roles, which includes all of us, did not hide their talents under a bushel.

(My colleagues who have been involved directly in developing and refining the method of “Leadership Insight Dialogue” are Rob Burke, Amanda Sinclair, Lynda Burke, Mary Milan and 1200 participant managers. I wish to acknowledge Karen Morley who as Associate Dean of MBS–Mt Eliza Executive Education encouraged us all to be more creative. Some of the shoulders we have stood on to develop this learning approach include: Ron Heifetz, starting with *Leadership Without Easy Answers*; Robert Kegan, starting with *Immunity to Change*; Robert Bales, starting with *Social Interaction Theory and Measurement*; William Isaacs, starting with *The Art of Dialogue*; Otto Scharmer, starting with *Theory U*; David Bohm, starting with *On Dialogue*; Ed Schein, starting with *Organisational Culture and Leadership*; Jon Kabat Zinn, starting with *Coming To Our Senses*; Gregory Kramer, starting with *Insight Dialogue*; Ian Gawler and Paul Bedson, starting with *Meditation An In-Depth Guide*; Amanda Sinclair, starting with *Leadership for the Disillusioned*; Sohail Inayatullah, starting with *Questioning the Future* ; Martin Seligman, starting with *Learned Optimism*; Irvin Yalom, starting with *Love’s Executioner*; Norman Doidge, starting with *The Brain That Changes Itself*.)