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Leadership-as-Practice: Antecedent to Leaderful Purpose

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Leadership-as-Practice: Antecedent to Leaderful Purpose

--by Joe Raelin

Abstract

The practice perspective of leadership de-emphasizes purpose and rather recognizes pre-reflective forms of intentionality carried out in embodied practices that may be subsequently guided by democratic, emancipatory, and reflexive processes. Although leadership-as-practice should be classified as a descriptive metaethical theory, it can be animated by normative accounts derived from exploratory and critical discourses.

MAD Statement

The contribution of the telos of social justice and sustainability needs to be accompanied by the exploratory study of the processes that detail social and material interactions that may alter the trajectory of the flow of practices within the organization. By focusing on process, we observe the actual doings or enactments of leadership that require mining prior to diving into goal attainment.

In this Opinion Piece, I offer a commentary on Rune Todnem By's (2021) recent foundational article in *JCM* and in so doing, clarify distinctions between leadership-as-practice and leaderful purpose. His paper, "Leadership: In Pursuit of Purpose," makes an important contribution to collective leadership and heralds some new directions being taken by the journal, especially its new focus on reframing leadership and organizational practice. In considering the role of purpose in leadership, Professor By reframes leadership ontology as the pursuit of collective purpose rather than an activity that special individuals do for others. And purpose is concerned with making a difference and deriving meaning to matters not only beyond the individual but beyond the individual organization. In particular, it is dedicated to sustaining core values guided by the common good such as the utilitarian goal of achieving the best possible outcome for the greatest number of stakeholders. It is also shaped by formalist guidelines such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which together constitute the world's shared plan to end extreme poverty, reduce inequality, and protect the planet by 2030.

The role of purpose certainly has a place in leadership studies but it may be overplayed when it comes to practice considerations. Part of the reason is the need to emphasize process. As Professor By points

out in his article, newer models of leadership, such as Drath et al.'s (2008) DAC (direction, alignment, and commitment) model and the new PAC (replacing DAC's direction with purpose) model, attest that it is explicitly processes which produce these functional outcomes. However, these models, such as By's PAC, suggest that process is driven by purpose, whereas leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) is concerned with an unfolding and continual flow of processes whereby material-discursive engagements may contingently produce emergent meaning (Raelin, 2017).

While I call here for a de-emphasis on purpose, I nevertheless have heightened its importance in an applied and normative variant of L-A-P referred to as "leaderful practice" (Raelin, 2003). In leaderful practice, other than its call for a concurrent and collective leadership not dependent on any one individual to mobilize direction and action for others, there is commitment to democratic and emancipatory as well as at times liberatory processes of direct participation by involved parties through their own exploratory, creative, and communal discourses (Raelin, 2011). The seeming contradiction in these views calls for an explanation.

Let's start by considering the phenomenological roots of practice. I will propose that Professor By's conception of purpose can be considered rational. It is a property of the mind and is thus a mental state directed towards an object. In the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology as articulated by Merleau-Ponty, purpose can also be referred to as "operative," which is a pre-reflective form of intentionality (McWeeny, 2019). Accordingly, it moves the source of purpose from the intellect to perception and emotions. As in the experience of love, it can precede explicit awareness but nevertheless "carry towards someone" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945[1962], p. 381). Thus, it becomes manifest in the day-to-day operations of a person's life and emerges out of the ambiguity of intentional experience. It also becomes subject to contextual constraints that can cloud our choices. So-called "regimes of practice" (Foucault, 1991) can discipline actors turning them into governed subjects under the oftentimes unobtrusive and covert control of the organization and other institutions. Discipline through existing norms and institutions may infiltrate our purpose. Overturning these structures, though problematic, requires reflexivity among actors engaged in material-discursive interaction.

So where do these arguments leave the development of purpose as a key leadership principle? They suggest that operative intention can precede agency and yet be incorporated into leadership activity. For Schatzki (2002), teleoaffective structures along with habitus (internalized predispositions guiding cultural choice) (Bourdieu, 1977) and institutions organize our practices by expressing our

emotions toward an object. These phenomena together in interaction may enable or constrain changes in trajectories that characterize leadership in one setting but not in another.

Accordingly, the leadership in L-A-P can occur without explicit purpose (though with embodied sentiment) and with change deconstructed or reconstructed, blocked or enhanced, diverted or accomplished. We focus on process because the actual doings or enactments of leadership contain rich information that needs to be mined before we focus on goal attainment, which can regrettably lead to premature measurement and evaluation. Assessment of this nature can bypass the horizontal, vertical, diagonal, recursive, and interwoven interactions that together with the contributions of time, space, and material alter the trajectories of the flow of practice, and in so doing, at times create leadership. Consequently, contrary to what Ford et al. (2021) report, I submit that “day-to-day leadership” can be as much about change as “change leadership.” Admittedly, there are routines that are associated with everyday leadership, but “accidents” occur as people challenge and modify traditions to cope with unexpected contingencies. These accidents can release the dynamics of leadership otherwise lost to view unless we make the commitment to observe and participate in the lived realities of people and their engagements.

Consider a case at a large industrial organization reported out by Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff (2010) regarding the handling of a warehouse. It is currently under the control of a subsidiary but has to be transferred to a division. The outcome has seemingly been decided, so from an output perspective, the transaction can be easily managed and measured. Has the subsidiary made the transfer in the allotted time without flaws. Many goals are not as clear-cut as this one; some shift because of changing strategy, culture, demand, or just from the passage of time, but when accomplished at a particular point in time, one could say that change leadership has been achieved.

However, this outcomes approach could have missed a host of dynamics that indeed were observed and recorded by the Crevani et al. practice study. The warehouse became an artifact that participated in the at times business-like and at times heated discussions entailing leadership. In the deliberations, there was no reference to formal positions; the actors co-constructed the problem as they tackled it. They also distributed roles regarding who was to do what. They made these arrangements seemingly because of attributed competencies and responsibilities. At moments, the conversation became highly emotional and upsetting because of presumptions and concerns about the requirements of the task.

More detailed examination of the case could be accomplished through phenomenological study, concerned with observation of participants' lived experiences in their own terms, not those of the researchers. In this setting, the variability in human experience would be documented along with the shared experiences of the multiple participants. Although details would be incorporated, there would also be a commitment to understand the meaning of the whole system along with the researchers' evolving understanding. This approach is often referred to as the "double hermeneutic" in which – in the words of Smith et al. (2009) – "the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (p. 3). Employing the technique known as IPA or interpretative phenomenological analysis (Eatough & Smith, 2017), one can go even deeper uncovering layers as they arise from a dual approach: a hermeneutics of empathy and a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970). For example, why were the participants unwilling to admit their inadequacy in handling the problem and did their silence distort the outcome?

Once the study of practice is underway, researchers can begin to electively add an axiological layer which would consider qualifications to the nature of the practices, such as whether there were strategically sustainable ends. A constraint on this kind of study would be to persist in considering leadership *as* a practice rather than *in* practice. We are not so much concerned with the entitative posture of individual nominal leaders, operating within practices or orchestrating leadership practices generally, as we are in leadership occurring within the flow of practices among interacting actors and their artifacts. To truly understand how to create sustainable organizations, we need to first understand some of the micro practices creating meaning among constellations of people and material as they do their work.

In the case of leaderful practice, I have registered a commitment to a kind of practice that unabashedly embraces an ideology of democratic participation by all involved actors in forming communities within which members through social critique may have a better chance to resist oppression and other forms of inequitable social arrangements than through reliance on sole heroic leaders (Raelin, 2011). Further, consistent with Professor By's call for sustainable development, I embrace enabling structures that support democratic and emancipatory processes that spur the reflexivity of any practice to preserve a sustainable future. And although visioning is rejected as a pre-ordained, pre-practice individual exercise, the search for and articulation of meaning are endorsed as purpose emanating from the collective sensemaking of the community.

Given the rise of autocratic-inclined populism in the world today, perhaps I can finish by demonstrating how a leadership-as-practice perspective can be adapted in a way to ethically contribute to a participative democratic world in which members of a community can search and learn together and become mutually responsible for their own decisions and action. Let's begin by considering a pragmatic and genealogical approach to democratic inquiry. Pragmatism as a forerunner to postmodern views and through the keen insight of John Dewey (1929) was able to propose how one could maintain an anti-essentialist position while supporting democratic institutions. Although there is no foundation for truth within the pragmatic tradition, there can be a common search for and ultimate consensus on the value of justice. Correspondingly, public actors may not agree if or when they have found truth but they may together realize when they have achieved democracy (Janos, 2010).

Once a cooperative socially established human activity is established, we may then ask how it should be held together. Traditionalists such as MacIntyre (2007) would propose an adherence to virtues, such as courage, prudence, and honesty (Ladenson, 1986), to sustain the ethical activity. To these virtues, some would add purpose perhaps in the form of telos, as suggested by Professor By, as a vision of moral unity that derives meaning for each community given its respective traditions (Moore, 2015). For By, regardless of context, purpose should be guided more by internal than external goods because the former are valued for their own sake and for the common good rather than for power and influence. Nevertheless, MacIntyre (2007) himself argues that internal goods be exercised without regard to their consequences, especially those that "are the mark of worldly success" (p. 198). Democratic leadership and L-A-P scholar Woods (2016) goes even further suggesting that such goods be based on a philosophy of *co-development* in which people discover and unfold from within themselves beyond a reliance on rules or virtues. Rather their ethical agency will evolve in practice as they develop a profound respect for others and a commitment to their community.

Also frowning on a reliance on definitive consequences, genealogists maintain that ethical inquiry is perspectival and emerges from contemporaneous processes (Lightbody, 2008), among which would be the discursive construction of dialogue. Dialogue often invokes the nomination of particular values, but when it does, these values emerge not from individuals and their virtues but from material-social interactions and their context. Accordingly, any leadership approach, such as L-A-P based on genealogy, would reject the idea of traditional and universal moral authority and the discovery of a teleological reality. Inquirers would rather engage values and each other through a contested interaction along with a critical reflection dependent upon not just how one sees oneself but how one sees others and how

one understands how others see one's self. One becomes involved with other colleagues, community members, and stakeholders arising from these material and social encounters. To be distinguished from mob democracy, leadership-as-practice especially when shifted into leaderful co-development advocates in its theory and application that such encounters be deliberative and collaborative. Mobs, on the other hand, as one of the American Republic's founders, James Madison (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, 1961), explained: "are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community." In effect, they are not open to the critical inquiry of others.

Let's return to the original concern about the ambiguity of L-A-P regarding its tentative commitment to telos as an unflinching purpose. Although L-A-P is a descriptive metaethical theory that needs to be complemented by embroidery, such as by *leaderful practice* or *co-development*, to animate its normative purpose, it would be premature to proceed with the latter without sufficient understanding of the idiosyncrasies of practice with its recursive, interpenetrating, shifting, interlocking, fragmented, and flexible nature. If we fail to understand the constitution of practice, we will likely fail in our quest to move beyond the entitative foundations of leadership because we may not understand the material-social nature of leadership in the making and *in situ*. We may not appreciate that the search for any moral truth is co-constructed through social interaction and by knowledge emanating from it. We may come to know far more about leadership and change as we explore the practicable and grounded practice view.

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