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In Leadership, Look to the Practices Not to the Individual

Joe Raelin

There is a new approach to leadership that has been growing in recent years, and it is called "Leadership-as-Practice." As an offshoot of the so-called "practice turn" in the social sciences, referring to the study of everyday activities, it challenges some of our traditional views of leadership that have relied on the grandeur of particular traits and behaviors of gifted individuals, who are accorded power over those called followers. And followers are those told to take their place in line. In leadership-as-practice, or L-A-P, we look for leadership in everyday practices, those regularized and sometime emergent activities performed by various actors within an organization or community (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny, 2001) In L-A-P, to find leadership, we must look to the practices within which it is occurring.

So, through the lens of L-A-P, I seek to release leadership from its role-driven, romantic, influence relationship (Raelin, 2016). We can have leadership without pre-establishing the occupants of leadership roles. We are not dependent on particular individuals to mobilize and make decisions for others. Leadership can be a process of co-creation. The effort is intrinsically collective. The parties to the practice engage in dialogical and nonverbal exchange, in particular, they display an interest in listening deeply to one another, in reflecting upon new perspectives, and in entertaining the prospect of changing direction based on what they learn.

Why Is L-A-P Important?

It has become nearly axiomatic that the heroic, command-and-control leadership style is having a dampening effect on the creativity and energy of people in our organizations and communities. According to philanthropist Ray Dalio, founder of Bridgewater Associates (quoted in Glazer, 2019): "the greatest tragedy….comes from the inability of people to have thoughtful disagreement to find out what's true." Placing employees into followership, Glazer adds,

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shuts managers off from constructive feedback that could build or reshape a practice.

The important point to consider in L-A-P is that if people are dissatisfied with leadership or uncertain about it, the L-A-P model allows the parties committed to the practice to enter an authentic dialogue to reproduce or transform it – and in so doing, they are creating leadership. In a nutshell, we consider leadership to occur when social processes change the trajectory of the flow of practices in which people are engaged. And these practices can change through the efforts of anyone or by the collective as a whole through collaborative activity; we do not need to await an order from "on-high."

Who's on Board?

We are at a moment in time in leadership research and practice when both researchers and practitioners are thirsty for new models of leadership that could be more practical, far-reaching, and reflective in helping us move beyond the standard individualistic approach. In addition to L-A-P, there are many other allied traditions that have joined – even preceded L-A-P – in this critical tradition. For example, there are shared and distributed models (Gronn, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003) that speak to leadership as a mutual and plural activity (Denis, Langley, and Sergi, 2012). These approaches, compared to L-A-P though, tend to keep the standard leader-follower roles intact while attempting to distribute power more fairly.

There is also the relational leadership approach (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Crevani, 2015) that is probably the closest cousin to L-A-P; the difference being that L-A-P incorporates not only activity but also materiality as playing a significant role in leadership not simply because practices imply the use of tools and objects but because the latter contribute to and embody leadership in the course of action. In addition, the relational approach tends to be largely what is called *entitative*, whereas the L-A-P model is *process*-oriented. Entities are stable things or people that stand alone or are in subject-subject or subject-object relationships. In the process approach, humans and their socio-material elements co-constitute as an unfolding set of fluid emergent practices.

How Does L-A-P Change Research?

What's most critical is that in L-A-P, we focus on the practices *in situ* – as they are occurring, as well as on the collective beliefs and co-constructions that arise to guide subsequent individual and collective action. This process-oriented approach requires slowing down the action sufficiently to study the discernible practices and interactions. The challenge for us

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in the L-A-P field is that practices are often tacit, making them hard to capture. The practices are also recursive so there needs to be a relatively long duration to see their unfolding and emergent nature. Further, although the practices are often historically situated, they are consistently open to contemporary contestation. L-A-P research does not look for peace or harmony or consensus, let alone truth. It seeks an inquiry that is lived or that is true to those who are living it. Accordingly, the inquiry is open to a diversity of views, discourses, and sentiments.

In terms of methodology, L-A-P would need to take advantage of interpretive forms of inquiry, applying discursive, narrative, ethnographic, and/or aesthetic approaches using thick description and diverse modes that attempt to capture the dialogical and practice activity concurrently in process in all its complexity and ambiguity (Raelin, 2020). The role of the researcher would not so much be to inquire from outside the activity but to provide tools to encourage the observed to become inquirers themselves (Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008). Such an approach can bring us closer to the lived reality of what people practicing leadership do rather than what they say they do, open new light on underlying forces and dynamics, and uncover those tacit processes that contribute, albeit at time unintentionally, to leadership.

How Does L-A-P Change Leadership Development?

Another area that requires a good deal of attention is the fate of leadership development. If we are interested in developing leadership along practice lines, the entire scope of leadership development needs to change. Rather than locating it away from the office at pristine offsites, *leadership-as-practice development*, as Denyer and Turnbull James (2016) refer to it, requires returning to the very setting where the practices are going on. The authors go on to assert that these practices often take place "on the hoof involving skilled, improvised, in-situ coping, dialogue, and collaborative learning" (pp. 265-266). So, rather than learn best practices, skills, or competencies using case examples other than their own "case," participants would need to learn how to address and solve their own problems in their own settings, such as via action learning. Further, they need to confront these problems with those who are directly and mutually engaged.

Leadership development thus requires an acute immersion into the practices that are embedded within the lived experience of the participants. The engagement would likely need to occur within a group that is attending to its own work, but the developers would introduce novel forms of conversation that would be aimed as much at reflecting and learning as at task accomplishment. In this way, they gain the capacity to reconstruct their activity on behalf of their mutual interests. In addition, if the engagement is based on the equal contribution and

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access of all the involved actors, it may propel their democratic tendencies since it endorses public free expression unreliant on any one single individual to mobilize action and make decisions on behalf of others. Participants act out of their own craftsmanship when and where needed. Their engagement is not based on any benefits extrinsic to the work; rather, it arises from the sheer enjoyment of accomplishment.

What About Ethics?

A critical ideological question in L-A-P is whether or not it is more predisposed to democratic action compared to other extant models of leadership. Woods (2016) believes that it is because, relying on a sense of connectedness with others, it cannot be based on a philosophy of dependence in which followers without discretion follow the "right" leader who is assumed to be the beacon of moral rectitude. Rather L-A-P observes a philosophy of co-development in which people discover and unfold from within themselves. It seeks to engage people in critical dialogue in which they learn to question the language and practices that bear the imprint of social domination. On the other hand, our so-called era of "post-bureaucracy" and "post-heroic" leadership, though characterized by flexible peer decision-making processes, also comes with greater use of such control methods as electronic surveillance and monitoring (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998). Under these conditions there is a chance of a resumption of the iron cage of standard bureaucracy, characterized by vertical accountability and suppression of voice. L-A-P challenges the very assumptions of vertical leadership. Its vitality comes from not requiring pre-specified outcomes in areas of uncertainty and exploration; rather, it derives from a collaboration inclusive of people's own communal, shared, and exploratory discourses.

The Challenge Ahead

We have seen in many parts of the world the adverse effects derived from single leaders spiraling out of control because of their abuse of power. We have often participated in this abuse by ceding our power to them, even when we're the ones engaged in any given practice that contributes to the vitality of our organizations and communities. We therefore may enact leadership by our very involvement in those practices. We the people are the ones who can be responsible. Let's study and focus more on practices rather than individuals to determine the best course of action to which good leadership can take us.

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