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Leadership-as-practice: Theory and application—An editor’s reflection

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Leadership-as-Practice: Theory and Application – An Editor’s Reflection

-by Joe Raelin

The editor of this journal, Dennis Tourish, has given me the rare opportunity to write to *Leadership* readers about our new research volume (of which I am the book editor), *Leadership-as-Practice: Research and Application*. I am very pleased and honored to do so, and I willingly have accepted Dennis’ gracious invitation because our book speaks literally to a new movement in leadership studies, a movement so disparate from conventional leadership studies as to be called radical (as well as critical). And yet, aside the production of a book, my 18 co-authors and I would be hard-pressed to find any outlet for our work except for this journal in which, incidentally, most of us have published. In these pages, I hope to explain why our movement is so radical (and even more critical than the “crits”) but also why it is natural and necessary for 21st Century leadership.

I have boldly used the word “movement” to describe leadership-as-practice or L-A-P, though the movement obviously incorporates a number of closely related traditions, such as collective, shared, distributed, and relational leadership, all of which push for a line of inquiry (ours focusing on leadership as a practice) that differentiates from a focus on traits, behaviors, abilities, or competencies. What makes L-A-P unique is its commitment to release leadership from a role-driven, entitative influence relationship. Nor does it pre-establish the occupants of leadership roles. Heeding the warning from Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) that the sheer act of naming someone a leader may in some cases over-emphasize and in other cases undermine reports of leadership practice as it is occurring, L-A-P pursues and seeks to understand leadership activity wherever and however it appears. What makes our approach movement-like is its observance of some of the attributes of social mobilization from social movement theory (see, e.g., James and van Seters, 2014). In particular, those of us working in the broadly defined practice domain have formed a collective identity that has assumed a normative orientation for changing the conventional view of leadership. Further, we hope that our collective efforts, as per other movements, will continue across time as adherents join us to advance our agenda of change.

In this short article, I would like to characterize for readers the essence of our L-A-P approach as depicted in the book, while sharing some highlights from its contributors, among whom are some of the most prominent and highly cited progressive scholars in the world undertaking critical studies in the field of leadership. First, let’s turn to a description of the basic architecture of the movement. As a practice, L-A-P exponents contend that leadership emerges

and unfolds through day-to-day experience. The social and material-discursive contingencies impacting the leadership constellation – the people who are effecting leadership at any given time – do not reside outside of leadership but are very much embedded within it. To find leadership, then, we must look to the practice within which it is occurring.

The practice view in a nutshell depicts immanent collective action emerging from mutual, discursive, sometimes recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment and over time among those engaged in the practice. By its nature, it challenges our traditional views of leadership because it does not rely on the attributes of individuals nor need it focus on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers, which historically has been the starting point for any discussion of leadership. It is this point that creates divergence from even critical views of leadership. Consider for example Barbara Kellerman's (2013) article in this journal on her book, *The End of Leadership*. Her entire edifice of critique is based on the status of followers. This emphasis is referred to as entitative by Lucia Crevani and Nada Endrissat in their chapter on "Mapping the Leadership-as-Practice Terrain." Entities are stable, controllable "things" that stand alone or are in subject-subject or subject-object relationships. The contrast to entities would be processes whereby humans and their agency and socio-material elements co-constitute as an unfolding set of fluid emergent practices (Thompson, 2011). The L-A-P movement embodying a process dynamic can become emancipatory without the need for a built-in role structure that critical theorists require in which titular leaders are exposed for their oppression of powerless followers (Collinson, 2011).

Leadership-as-Practice in its ontology may incorporate both practices and practice. Practices, as per the definition of Pickering (1995), refer to specific sequences of activities that may repeatedly recur, whereas practice refers to emergent entanglements that tend to extend or transform meaning over time. In her chapter, "Where's the Agency in Leadership-as-Practice," Barbara Simpson links practices to an inter-actional mode of activity in which pre-formed entities – be they people or discourses or institutions – vie for influence over other "inter-actors." Practice, on the other hand, is associated with a more trans-actional mode characterized by a continual flow of processes where material-discursive engagements produce meaning that is emergent and mutual. Another way to differentiate these two forms of activity is to use the philosophical language employed by Ann Cunliffe and Paul Hibbert in their chapter on the "Philosophical Basis of Leadership-as-Practice," in which practices may be considered objectivist or subjectivist, depending upon whether the practices in question are studied as objects separate from the people engaged in them or whether they are subject to the intentions and interpretations of the actors who experience them. Practice, meanwhile, may be considered intersubjective in character because it is interwoven not between people but "within" the dynamic unfolding of their becoming (see Shotter's chapter, "Turning Leadership Back-to-Front and Inside-Out").

Having presented an overview of the L-A-P movement, it may next be timely to sketch some of the thematic building blocks that may distinguish it from other prior traditions in leadership. Although *Leadership-as-Practice* fills in some of these themes, we urge our readers to continue to build out the field with their own conceptual and research excursions.

One such theme surely has to be the role of ideology or the value structure of the movement. L-A-P privileges the value of social interactions and connectedness, in which case, as Philip Woods attests in his chapter on the “Democratic Roots” of leadership-as-practice, it cannot be based on a philosophy of dependence in which followers without discretion follow leaders even if the latter are empowering. Empowerment in this instance still requires an empowerer, whereas in a philosophy of co-development, people discover and unfold from within themselves. The practice of leadership is not dependent on any one person to mobilize action on behalf of everybody else. The effort is intrinsically collective. The parties to the practice engage in semiotic, often dialogical, exchange, and in some cases for those genuinely committed to one another, they display an interest in listening to one another, in reflecting upon new perspectives, and in entertaining the prospect of changing direction based on what they learn (Raelin, 2013). Not requiring pre-specified outcomes, practice can actually precede agency while focusing on a process that can be inclusive of participants’ own communal, shared, and exploratory discourses.

Nevertheless, we must also recognize that participatory spaces are imbued with power relations that in some cases cause suppression of voices and self-muting among those disenfranchised from the dominant discourse, thus thwarting critical review (Cleaver, 2007; Kesby, 2005). For example, as Jackie Ford in her chapter on “Gendered Relationships and the Problem of Diversity in L-A-P,” points out, L-A-P exponents are challenged to show that the full scope of dynamic exchange is welcomed, in other words, not only about what is said but what is left unspoken or unheard; about who is included and who is not; and about the nature of any social interactions that may promote or exclude participation in leadership.

By focusing our attention on the group in practice, however, L-A-P is witness to the formation of community within which members through social critique, contestation and reflective emancipatory dialogue may have a better chance to resist oppression and other forms of inequitable social arrangements (Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff, 2010; Raelin, 2014). Indeed, L-A-P potentially represents an alternative critical discourse to the mainstream personality approach to leadership which tends to incarnate the individual leader as a beacon of prosperity and moral rectitude.

Another line of inquiry that has been precipitated by L-A-P research is its explicit ontological focus that appears to differentiate it from sympathetic relational approaches. Conversation is surely critical in L-A-P but it is not necessarily seen as a text or a conduit to represent or reveal a

reality. Rather, as John Shotter points out in his earlier cited chapter, the elements of talk are themselves emergent realities created in a temporal unfolding flow. Caroline Ramsey adds to Shotter's conceptualization in her chapter on "Conversational Travel," in which she suggests that conversation be treated as an invitation to intra-action among parties to a practice that at times can produce a change of trajectory that realizes leadership in the moment.

The leadership emanating from any moment-by-moment interplay may be sustaining or may be ephemeral but its identification occurs without the need to infer the intentions of those engaged. Leadership is often occurring right in front of us not necessarily in the significant expressions of named individuals (Shotter, 2006). Gergen and Hersted in their chapter on "Developing Leadership as Dialogue Practice," remind us that "there are no leaders independent of the relational patterns of which they are a part." In constructing a process ontology of leadership in the making, what may be required is a retrospective examination of the outcomes of interlocking practices. In this examination, though we may or may not find agreement in any coordination taking place, the process of continuous unfolding often manifests a choice-point from which multiple routes may be taken.

Leadership-as-Practice: Research and Application also entertains the embodied nature of L-A-P, suggesting that it is not cognition in its isolated condition located within the mind of a prime instigator, call him or her the leader, that mobilizes leadership. Rather, leadership occurs from an interaction with the environment through both individual and collective sensorimotor processing.

Viviane Sergi in her chapter "Who's Leading the Way?" explores some of the undiscovered elements of leadership practice, looking in particular at how the design of material elements contributes to the achievement of leadership, defined in terms of directing, shaping, and ordering activities. Materiality plays a significant part in the process of production not simply because practices always imply the use of tools and objects: it does so because, as Latour (2005) has suggested, it makes a difference in the course of action.

When it comes to the question of identity in leadership, the L-A-P movement also makes the case that doing leadership is distinct from talking about it. When equated, there can be a tendency for the subject to create a fantasy leadership identity. This is because those designated leaders have a need to represent themselves with coherence and distinctiveness though they may be involved in work that is often fluid, precarious, and filled with contradiction and fragmentation. According to Brigid Carroll in her chapter on "Leadership as Identity," identity is seen as a mediator between the self and the surrounding social structure that is created as actants use and move through organizational spaces (Ybema et al., 2009). It is not a quality existing prior to the context in which it is organized. According to Carroll, in spaces such as the IT environment that she employs in her case example, leadership identity is established

through the artefacts, conversations, spatial configurations, and routines that participants rely upon in responding to and reacting to the choices they are making in accomplishing their work.

In terms of the methodologies available to study L-A-P, the preference would be for more process-oriented studies and those that consider cultural, historical, and political conditions embedded within the leadership relationship (Knights and Willmott, 1992; Wood, 2005). Process-oriented dynamics would be rich in power dynamics and human relations and would privilege emergence and ambiguity over control and rationality and thus would resist closure on the familiar categories of leadership that are often individualistic and directive. At the same time a process approach, in which leadership is seen as a continuous social flow, would of necessity require slowing down the action sufficiently to study the discernible practices and interactions. Further, L-A-P methodology would be interested in the collective beliefs and co-constructions that at times give rise to subsequent individual and collective action. Researchers also have the opportunity, might we even say the requirement, to study leadership at multiple interacting levels beyond the individual level of analysis.

The research of leadership under a L-A-P processual lens, then, as Steve Kempster, Ken Parry, and Brad Jackson illustrate in their chapter on “Methodologies to Discover and Challenge Leadership-as-Practice,” would lend itself to qualitative methodologies, such as narrative and conversational analysis, content analysis, critical incidents, ethnographies and auto-ethnographies, and activity theory. These methods are holistic and diverse so as to produce triangulation and stimulate theory illumination. Their nature is to use thick description to attempt to capture the dialogical and practice activity concurrently in process (Weick, 1989).

In the last perspective on our emerging L-A-P movement, consider how leadership development might need to adapt in a L-A-P world. At the outset, it would require an acute immersion into the practices that are embedded within social relations and between people, objects, and their institutions. It needs to be a learning associated with lived experience that occurs within specific historical, cultural, and local contexts (Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow, 2003). Such learning might deploy development approaches that take advantage of the so-called “action modalities” or interventions that have as their commonality a commitment to work with people where they are as they engage with one another on mutual problems, and offering them a means of collective reflection on their experience so as to expand and even create knowledge while at the same time serving to improve practice (Raelin, 2009).

In the chapter on “Leadership-As-Practice Development” or LaPD, David Denyer and Kim Turnbull James argue that although most leadership development programs address the topic of leadership, the focus is traditionally on leader competencies or personal development that is often detached from the very site in which the skills and competencies are to be applied. In their novel L-A-P development approach, Denyer and Turnbull James make liberal use of both

action learning and executive coaching to achieve learning in practice, but in comparison to action learning where the focus is more on an organizational challenge and the needed personal and organizational learning to overcome the challenge, in LaPD the focus is on collaboration and shared leadership practices.

The movement described in *Leadership-as-Practice: Theory and Application* seeks to respond to Denis, Langley, and Rouleau's call (2010) call for more attention to how leadership emerges and evolves in concrete social contexts. The movement is still evolving and needs this readership to contribute to its emerging theory and application. So far, in its articulation of a practice perspective, it has sought to release historical attention to the individual model of leadership that at times dampens the energy and creativity of other sources involved in leadership. L-A-P focuses instead on two emerging qualities: leadership's processual dynamics, which occur in situ unfolding over time, and its mundane character that speaks to its occurrence in banal situations and interactions. L-A-P also strives to achieve a collective wisdom where there would be joint recognition of insights based upon alternative frames of time and space, deep exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas, empathic social awareness based on public and concurrent reflection in practice, and appreciation for the need to either make choices or transcend them in the deliberative decision-making process.

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