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WORK-BASED LEARNING: HOW IT CHANGES LEADERSHIP

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Introduction

Readers might be wondering whether and how work-based learning connects to leadership. In this article, after defining how I view work-based learning, I will demonstrate that it impacts, indeed changes, leadership, but it does so by helping to produce a different form of leadership – a shared leadership or “leaderful” practice. Once explaining the leaderful approach, I will illustrate how work-based learning affects its four critical tenets.

Background on Work-Based Learning

I propose that work-based learning be considered not only a pedagogical method but a philosophical approach that characterizes how learners develop their knowledge to participate effectively and democratically in a civil society. It is concerned with how to make learning arise from our mutual experience with others, in particular, from our work together. Many of us, not only in academia but in our workplaces, have become conditioned to a classroom training model that separates theory from practice, making learning at times seem impractical or even irrelevant. But what if we were to make our worksite an acceptable location for learning?

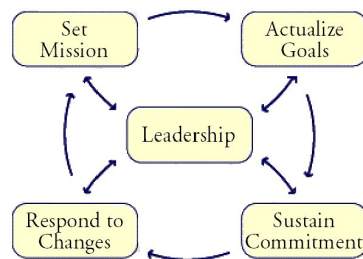
In work-based learning, theory is expressly merged with practice, while knowledge is considered to be fluid and changeable. Learning is centered around reflection on work practices. Hence, it offers practitioners faced with the relentless pace of pervasive change an opportunity to overcome time pressures by reflecting upon and learning from the artistry of their action.

Work-based learning uses many diverse technologies but primary is the deployment of action projects, learning teams, and other interpersonal experiences, such as mentorships, which permit and encourage learning dialogues. Learning dialogues are concerned with the surfacing, in the safe presence of trusting peers, those social, political, and even emotional reactions that might be blocking our personal development and operating effectiveness.

Background on Leadership

Although there are constantly evolving models prescribing the best approaches for assuming leadership, there may be reasonable agreement about what constitutes leadership, regardless of the model in question. In Figure 1, a functional model describes four critical processes of leadership (Raelin, 2003).

Figure 1: The Four Critical Processes of Leadership



The first critical process, setting a mission, defines the outcomes to which the organization or community becomes dedicated. People want to know where they're going together. The second, actualizing goals, is concerned with the varying tasks and activities that need to be organized to carry out the mission. The third, sustaining commitment and cohesiveness, addresses how people come together to feel that they are part of something. Lastly, responding to changes allows the

organization to adapt to changing environmental conditions. This last step may require a reset of the mission, so the model becomes iterative.

Work-Based Learning and Leadership

The especially dialogic approaches of work-based learning appear to surface a different form of leadership, one denoted by a collective form of leadership that I refer to as ‘leaderful’ practice (Raelin, 2003; 2010). This relatively new term is used because the idea of involving everyone in leadership and seeing leadership as a collective property is quite distinctive from its familiar individualistic and heroic archetype. Leaderful practice also falls into the domain of ‘shared’ and ‘distributed’ leadership (Gronn, 2002), which have roots in empowerment, self-directed work teams, and in self-leadership. However, unlike some traditions in shared leadership, it is a mutual rather than sequential or serial activity.

There is a natural relationship between work-based learning and leaderful practice that can be explained based on two principles. First, a spirit of organizational learning provides a critical condition for the effects of work-based learning to be fully realized. If everyone consciously participates in learning, be it formally or informally, then no one needs to stand by in a dependent capacity.

The second principle that underlies the link between work-based learning and leaderful practice is the endorsement of a culture of free inquiry. Since the root of many of our organizational problems may not be known in advance, there is a need for inquirers to be nonjudgmental and authentically curious.

The Four C's of Leaderful Practice

In order to illustrate the specific impact of work-based learning on leaderful practice, one final set of attributes needs to be explained, those being the critical tenets that constitute leaderful practice. These tenets are known as the four c's: that leadership be concurrent, collective, collaborative, and compassionate. In brief, concurrent leadership means that not only can many members serve as leaders; they can do so at the same time. No one, including the supervisor, has to stand down when someone is making a contribution as a leader. Collective leadership means that everyone in the group is participating in leadership; the team is not dependent on any one individual to take over. Collaborative leadership means that everyone is in control of and can speak for the entire team. All members pitch in to accomplish the work of the team. They engage with one another through dialogue, which, in turn, co-creates the enterprise. Finally, in compassionate leadership, members commit to preserving the dignity of every single member of the team, regardless of his or her background, status, or point of view.

The Shaping of Leaderful Practice through Work-Based Learning

As a powerful force for leadership development, work-based learning shapes leaderful practice through the aforementioned four c's. Here is how it operates:

On Concurrent Leadership: Because it professes that leadership can be exhibited by more than one person in the group at the same time, concurrent leadership is arguably the most radical proposition in leaderful practice. At the early stages of the life cycle of any team or organization, it is unlikely that inexperienced members will agree cognitively or behaviorally with this proposition. Hence, they may need encouragement, evidence, and practice to arrive at this form of participation. Work-based learning requires team members and facilitators to work through critical developmental issues. How prepared are its members to share leadership with one another? Do

they need to rely on one person to assume standard leadership responsibilities? Who will see to it that the best use will be made of the team's resources, that the strengths and weaknesses of the team members will be recognized? Who will provide support to team members in need? Who will be concerned with fostering team spirit? Who will explore and report on opportunities outside the group? These issues are learning issues. Work-based learning does not insist that they be lodged within any one person; rather, they become the knowledge responsibilities of the entire team.

On Collective Leadership: Having considered the concurrent perspective of leadership - that it can be practiced by members of a team at the same time - it is not a leap of faith to view leadership as something that the entire community does together. In such a setting, everyone is challenged to learn; no one needs to stand by in a dependent capacity. Participants assemble into learning teams where they begin to question one another about their project experiences. In due course, they also extend their inquiry to each other's professional and personal experiences. They develop a peripheral awareness of others. They come to know learning as a collective process that extends beyond the individual.

On Collaborative Leadership: Work-based learning models collaborative leadership through three explicit practices. First, it models dialogic processes that, as noted earlier, take a stance of nonjudgmental inquiry. Participants are encouraged to express genuine curiosity about others' suggestions and to avoid maintaining hidden interests. Second, they are encouraged to submit their own ideas and views to the critical scrutiny of others. In this way, they become receptive to challenges to their own ways of thinking, even to discovering the limitations of how they think and act. Third, they entertain the view that something new or unique might arise from a mutual inquiry that could reconstruct everyone's view of reality in an entirely new way. They are willing to disturb their own preconceived world views on behalf of a common good.

On Compassionate Leadership: Compassionate leadership uplifts an organization, since it represents a process that dignifies the human spirit to grow and achieve. In this way, compassion entails an appreciation of other cultures and sensitivity toward views that are less privileged than those in the dominant culture. As a grass-roots form of learning, work-based learning emphasizes such critical democratic values as humility and sustainability. Participants appreciate any social transformation because they participate in it and see their contribution as dependent on others

Conclusion

Practitioners in the development and learning field already know the value of work-based learning for learning purposes. It not only accomplishes something useful within the work environment but it concurrently provides a living learning opportunity whereby participants create and consume knowledge just-in-time to be useful to them. What we haven't explored sufficiently is work-based learning's tie to leadership development. In this article I have made the case that work-based learning does impact leadership but in a most profound way. It changes it. The work-based learning process as a collective and reflective experience transforms leadership in kind – toward a collaborative practice that can respond to contemporary demands to take advantage of all that people have to offer their teams and organizations.

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