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Examining the Contemporary Worker and the Workplace From a Leadership-as-Practice Perspective: A HRD Opportunity

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Abstract

In this article the author uses the lens of leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) to analyze the concerns of the worker in the contemporary workplace and proposes both new insights and potential remediations through a post-humanistic leadership centered on practice. L-A-P is designed to probe underneath the accepted or “natural” human resource practices to uncover the power dynamics in the workplace that have led to challenges to the worker in the form of burnout, lack of autonomy, and detachment. After introducing the practice approach to the workplace, the paper interrogates the potential value of leadership being viewed as a collaborative agency constituting changes in the trajectory of prefigured work practices that can have affirmative consequences via its ethical and critical approach to human resource development.

Keywords

Workers and the workplace, leadership-as-practice, organizational change, collective reflexivity, collaborative agency, critical management studies, post-humanism

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This essay focuses on the contemporary workplace and its challenges to the worker in the form of burnout, lack of autonomy, and detachment. The author's position is that the emerging field of "leadership-as-practice" or L-A-P and its unique approach to change is in an ideal place to address and redress this theme from the point of view of both the worker and the manager. L-A-P is a leadership approach that looks for leadership not in individuals but in social processes within a given work setting that can change the trajectory of the flow of ongoing practices or change the turning points in the spaces between workers. The practices in question can be ostensive or embodied and emergent and are shaped by the workers and their collective activities, discourses, space, and artifacts all of which can enhance or detract from what they are attempting to accomplish. So, in L-A-P, to find leadership one must look to the practices in which they are occurring (Raelin, 2023).

L-A-P is further committed to probe underneath accepted or "natural" human resource practices to uncover the power dynamics in the workforce that have led to reactions such as "quiet quitting" or resignations that continue to represent expressions of antipathy which have been around for as long as managers have expected workers to stay in their lane of doing and not thinking. Accordingly, this paper purposely uses the word "worker" rather than "employee" to designate, more in a sociological than economic sense, that workers in their relationship to their employer serve with a degree of dependency or vulnerability that without democratic intervention requires the application of protective labor laws (Davidov, 2005). This condition applies regardless whether the workers in question are blue-collar workers or those who serve in knowledge-based or professional capacities.

The paper, then, after providing some background on practice theory and, in particular, on leadership-as-practice (L-A-P), offers a unique practice theory-based perspective on the state of the worker in the contemporary workplace and how management can improve worker well-being through a collective form of human resource development (hereafter HRD). In particular, as will be articulated in the paper, the practice view gives workers the chance to develop dynamic emerging relationships through collective reflexivity, which in turn can produce a leadership in the flow of practice. Further, the practice in question can be one of co-development in which workers, through critical dialogue, begin to question, learn from, and collaborate with one another. Leadership of this nature can be particularly relevant in our increasingly digitalized workplaces in which there is a premium on improvisation in response to unexpected demands and crises.

In the pages to follow, the paper's contribution to the theme will be divided into five specific sub-themes: practice as a frame of reference for the workplace, the collective nature of work, the focus on change in leadership-as-practice, its approach to ethics and critical management studies, and finally L-A-P's post-humanistic treatment of the worker. The aim, in sum, is to provide an alternative lens to view the condition of the worker and consider ways to improve their work conditions through a post-humanistic leadership centered on practice.

Background

Let's begin by theorizing our conception of practice and how it can assist human resource development practitioners in understanding the situational dynamics occurring in the workplace and how they may be changed. First, in referring to practice, we are not using the term in the sense of a rehearsal or as a classifier of particular contextual activities, such as a professional practice or a teaching or yoga practice (Reich & Hager, 2014). Rather, guided by what is often referred to as the "practice turn" in social theory, practice is viewed as a social activity that is constituted by shared practices that actors incorporate to shape and interpret their own and others' subsequent actions (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984). These practices, furthermore, represent a coordinated nexus of doings and sayings governing conduct within a particular context (Schatzki, 1996). Materiality, constituting non-human objects and artifacts, also plays a critical role and is no longer just the backdrop of consequential actions. Accordingly, practice is not equivalent merely to what people do but in its strong form is constituted of activities that have meaning-making, identity-forming, and order-producing characteristics (Chia & Holt, 2006; Nicolini, 2009).

What does it take, then, to establish a practice? In their work on the construction of a management team, Bjørkeng et al. (2009) found three essential mechanisms:

- Authoring boundaries – referring to processes by which activities are constructed as a legitimate part of practicing (or not)
- Negotiating competencies – referring to what it takes to perform as a competent practitioner
- Adapting materiality – signifying the devices by which material configurations are enacted and entangled in practicing and constructed as essential elements of (a) practice

These mechanisms begin with the workers deciding by their statements or actions that particular activities are accepted as part of the practice, although variations may amend the conventional trajectories, such as when a team may decide whether to hear final objections to decisions that seem to have already been made. The same can be said for skills and competencies deemed essential to the practice along with new knowledge needed to supplement heretofore established capabilities. The introduction of new knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA's) typically falls within the function of HRD as organizations will need to rely on workers to incorporate new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, into the work flow (Mehdiabadi & Li, 2016). Accordingly, HRD practitioners would need to ensure the inclusion of such meta-competencies as skilled improvement or agility into their repertoire (Veisi et al., 2019). Finally, there needs to be acknowledgement of the contribution of particular tools and material, such as whether to introduce models or prototypes to test performance prior to launch.

A case example of the aforementioned dynamics was reported by Spillane and associates (Spillane et al., 2001) among elementary school science teachers who

exhibited leadership through their practices within their school organization. The example displays in particular the contribution of stakeholder coordination, expertise, material resources, and disciplinary reform to the change in teachers' practices. The case initially reflected the initiative of one of the new teachers, Steve, who had advanced knowledge of curriculum development and science education practices. He and his colleagues and external contacts introduced new methods using science fairs and project-based instruction. In particular, they challenged the "transmission model of instruction" in favor of methods emphasizing the "construction of knowledge" (p. 935). School discussions about one of the science fairs illustrated how it served as a framing artifact for some novel instructional efforts:

The first-grade teachers decided on a series of experiments that would introduce children to science as a methodological investigation of the world, then shift to the different domains in which science applies so that when the students reached fourth grade, they would be familiar with the processes of scientific investigation. As first grade teacher Irene explained: "We at first decided to simplify it for parents. But then we decided, wait a minute - what we need to do is model for the kids, model the experiments. We still don't have it right, but we need to model the scientific method and have the kids go home and try out the experiments" (p. 938).

Practice as a Frame of Reference for the Workplace

Having established the value of practice to understand work dynamics, it can be a key concept for signifying how workers can achieve active being-in-the-world. While some of these practices may be dispersed, there are many that are germane to particular occupations and professions. Each practice consists of work interactions shaped by histories of shared and contested meaning subject to ongoing engagement and negotiation by workers (Okhuysen et al., 2013). They will engage with one another using epistemic, social, and embodied modalities to determine how the given practice will be organized. In so doing, the practice will in turn affect the identities, positions, knowledge, and communication of the participants. Further, these practices occur at particular times and in particular spaces and are most often construed as part of a nexus of entwined activities which relate to each other and are linked through what Schatzki (2002) refers to as understandings, rules, and teleoaffective structures (p. 80).

When it comes to issues of time and duration, we know that workplace practices are transformed over time as are the goals and standards of performance. Consequently, workers need to renegotiate and reposition themselves in work practices throughout their working lives. Their participation needs to be enduring in order that they remain current. As a result, Billett (2002) concludes that the workers' changing competences, among other attributes, shape their "life direction and the kinds of interactions that they engage in" (p. 468).

The confluence of space and social interaction can also have significant practice effects on the worker and the workplace. In particular, the nature of any social discourse can be shaped by the spatial configuration of the sites in which interactions take place.

For example, integrated offices tend to have more unplanned conversations and more interaction across teams (Penn et al., 1999; Sailer et al., 2012). Movement within the workplace can be also encouraged by attractors, defined as facilities such as kitchens that are known to personalize the space by attracting further exchange (Kabo et al., 2015). The spatial configuration of a work setting can also have effects on creativity and innovation, and for our purposes here, it is also known to shape interactions that can either enhance or restrict change (Siebert et al., 2017).

The Collective Nature of Work and Learning

Besides contributing to our understanding of movement and space in the workplace, the practice perspective also points to the collective nature of a good deal of work activity. Knowledge work in our contemporary workplace often requires collaboration. Gherardi (2008) considers such work as “a collective bricolage enacted by those participating in a practice, mobilizing resources, using instruments, and employing a contingent and goal-directed rationality” (p. 523). Schatzki (2012) further points out that practice represents an organized constellation of different people’s activities and thus must be understood as an intersubjective experience anchored in the activities of multiple people, and not as the action of an individual.

The phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (1967) argued that no practice can be understood outside its intersubjectively created meaning and motive, both of which are thus socially constructed. Hence, practices take place at a social site, which can be thought of as a place where coexistence transpires through bundles of activities and arrangements. Workers need to rely upon their colleagues to develop their occupational identity, solidarity, and understanding about what it takes to be successful (Lloyd, 2009).

From the HRD field, we can attest that learning in the workplace also has a collective dimension that is different from and perhaps greater than the sum of workers’ individual learning. It depicts learning at the collective level suggesting that systems can learn independently of the individuals who occupy them (Shipton, 2006). Among the multilevel ways collective learning has been characterized are: (1) as a facilitator of the learning of its constituents, (2) as a mediator focusing on shared mental models and collective processes, (3) as a means of achieving the strategic renewal of an organization, and (4) as a link to improve the practices of the actors, such as customers and suppliers, within a network of organizations (Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Korin & Liikamaa, 2023).

The collective learning process is thus bound up with collective practice. Participants learn not from a transfer of knowledge within a confined space but from a contested interaction among fellow inquirers who find a way to share their ideas and interpretations in the midst of dynamic unfolding activity. It derives from an epistemology of practice that appreciates the process of learning in the midst of action itself with one’s fellow learners (McCormack et al., 2013; Raelin, 2007).

Labor process theory would point out that workplace regimes featuring a high degree of division of labor, repetitive tasks, managerial control, and lack of voice would nullify the opportunity for independent exercise of skill, learning, and expression of identity (Thompson & Vincent, 2010). On the other hand, invoking a subjective critical realist position, Laaser and Karlsson (2022) point out that workers are collective agents and possess what Archer refers to as “degrees of freedom” to determine their own course of action (Archer, 2003, p. 7). Their practices, consequently, are guided by positive impulses to create independent spaces in which they can develop their identities, shape their own rules and values, and guide how they relate to and learn with one another (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). A question remains, however, whether managerial control in particular spaces become totalizing to such an extent as to threaten workers’ security, integrity, and autonomy.

The response of workers to threatening forms of control has been found to be diverse, ranging from compliance to covert and, ultimately, overt forms of resistance. For example, to maintain their identities, they may collectively display a gesture of compliance while deploying such tactics as cynicism, irony, foot dragging, boredom, staged performance, or reinvention of meaning (Fleming & Spicer, 2008; Noury et al., 2022; Sitaloppi et al., 2022; Ybema & Horvers, 2017). Ultimately, any movement towards the practices entailed in resistance appears to arise from contradictions between the attempts by management to define an organizational identity and the corresponding response of workers who maintain their own sense of personal and collective meaning.

It may useful to pause here to say more about the nature of the intersubjective relation *between* workers. The negotiation in practice between individuals, with all of their life experiences and the immediate social experience, constitutes a relation that Billett (2008) refers to as a relational interdependence. Since workers can incorporate or ignore the suggestions of others, individual agency cannot be reducible to social agency. Indeed, the workplace interdependence between parties is often disjointed and inconsistent. Beckett (2013) refers to the give-and-take of the workplace as a “complex manifestation of emergence” that is neither predictable nor reducible. It is a form that we might call an “intra-action” (Barad, 2003), in which the conversation is not between separate, self-contained entities but as a dynamic emerging relation shaped by the parties in response to each other, to their artifacts, and to their surroundings. In this albeit uneven and unpredictable way, practices can be transformed and remade (Nicolini, 2012).

A good example of an interdependent practice is the case of large-scale software development, which often requires dealing with uncertainty and communication and coordination breakdowns. Team members can be involved in writing code over many months, and it is often impossible to specify designs entirely in advance and yet the ultimate product must mesh perfectly. Techniques and artifacts, such as modularization of code, integration plans, component interface specifications, and documentation, help manage interdependence but developers also need to use informal communication channels to address seeming intractable issues that crop up (Cramton & Webber, 2005). According to Herbsleb and Grinter (1999, p. 86), “what appear to be casual

conversations around the water cooler serve to informally exchange (critical) information and experience... Informal communication fills in the details of work, handles exceptions, corrects mistakes, and manages ripple effects of previous decisions.”

The Focus on Change in L-A-P

As was pointed out at the outset, a key discriminating element in L-A-P is its focus on change in the trajectory of a collective practice. It considers and seeks to improve human resource sustainability – and ultimately organizational effectiveness – through the collective voices and actions of the worker. Compared to individualistic accounts of leadership focusing on entities (i.e., leaders), the ontological emphasis in L-A-P resides within the processes of interaction between actors and between them and their material accompaniments. Those who are working on an endeavor collectively are participants or collaborators whose mutual activities may or may not change a turning point in participants’ shared knowhow, thus leadership may or may not ensue (Simpson, 2016). When it does change a turning point, which in turn may also precipitate a change in the trajectory in the flow of a given practice, it can be said that leadership has occurred by the inter-connected parties who have come together to accomplish a mutual endeavor.

What we do know is that as workers engage and learn with one another, they commit to reflecting on their own actions and consequently learn to reconstruct them according to their mutual interests. This public form of reflection has the potential not only to create new knowledge but to open up space for innovative ways to accomplish work, or even to reconceive how the work is done in the first place. Practitioners gradually become “co-subjective,” suggesting a penchant to momentarily separate from themselves (Spiegelberg, 1975; Tsoukas, 2009). They begin to recognize their limitations or the limitations of the “natural attitude,” which in phenomenology refers to a habitual way of reacting to phenomena (Luft, 2002). By opening themselves up to how others see the same phenomena from diverse perspectives, they can occasionally overturn the habitus (Bourdieu’s way of referring to how we are predisposed to view the world) that they inherit (Bourdieu, 1977).

The essential element in change is leadership itself, for without it, the flow of practice would continue as is without a change in trajectory, conditioned by a range of institutional forces and the habitus. Even with leadership, however, there is no guarantee of instrumental outcomes. Agency simply produces movement and even if changes are produced by leadership, they are not necessarily for the better. However, as long as there is collective reflection within the operating group, there is every chance that the re-direction and re-orientation will be of value to those participating. Simpson (2016) refers to this form of leadership as a trans-actional agency, an in-the-moment metaphoric wave resulting in a combined agency or a co-action. At any moment, anyone can contribute to the flow. Some add more by virtue of their experience. Others’ contributions may be intermittent. These trans-actions are saturated in power, but in a way that shapes movement rather than as a property of discrete entities.

An example of this form of leadership was reported by Zerjav and associates (Zerjav et al., 2014) in the collaborative design of projects in architecture, engineering, and construction. By analyzing the interaction dynamics, transition patterns, and knowledge-brokering activities of the workers involved in the operation of a medical imaging center, the authors found that leadership evolved as a blend of material-discursive practices across multiple domains of expertise. In particular, they found several factors that contributed to the emergence of leadership: domain knowledge ownership, frequency of interactions, actor responsiveness, and cross-disciplinary knowledge brokering. The findings reinforced the idea, in the authors' own words, that "leadership can and should be viewed as an opportunity, a situational and emergent interactive phenomenon rather than an inherent characteristic of invariably charismatic individuals and their supposedly heroic achievements" (p. 219).

L-A-P's Approach to Ethics and Critical Management Studies

So far, the paper has focused on social interactions over individualistic accounts of action in part because of the so-called flat ontology of L-A-P, in which humans as individuals are not accorded preordinate responsibility for agency (Raelin & Robinson, 2022). In addition, Mensch and Barge (2019) have noted that L-A-P seems to eschew any form of universal moral authority and even the discovery of a teleological reality. The response from L-A-P writers has been that L-A-P engages in confrontation with moral practices, seeking to deeply explore them from a collective and concurrent reflection-in-action. Further, its genealogical roots suggest an ethics that is co-constructed and negotiated in the flow of practice arising from a base that recognizes an innate capacity for ethical agency unimpeded by rules and sustained by a profound respect for others and a commitment to one's community (Raelin & Robinson, 2022).

L-A-P thus relies upon a principled pragmatism rather than a set of universal principles to guide people in their ethical decision-making (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009). Unlike directive models of leadership, L-A-P cannot be based on a philosophy of dependence in which followers, without discretion, follow the "right" leader who is assumed to be the fount of moral rectitude. Rather L-A-P observes a philosophy of *co-development* in which workers can discover and unfold from within themselves (Woods, 2016) and, then, intersubjectively with others. They engage in critical dialogue to question and learn from one another. Even in mundane and everyday practices, a commitment to the dignity of others can produce a shift, as Grandy and Śliwa (2017, p. 427) phrase it, from a focus on leadership ethics as a "project on oneself to a project in relation to and for others." Ultimately, although L-A-P often operates under conditions of soft power in which internal debates proceed as a contest to decide who has the right to orchestrate or "author" one's interest, it can also intervene in conditions of hard power. Hard power looms when particular forces seek to deprive impacted groups (via gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and the like) of their participation and even survival in social systems (Raelin, 2023). L-A-P's response to these conditions can be

emancipatory to the extent it promotes critical dialogue as a basis for worker consciousness and enlightenment and as a challenge to practices that bear the imprint of social domination (Spicer et al., 2009).

Research in the domain of critical human resource development has pointed out, however, that discourse, unless constitutive, may not be sufficient to effect worker emancipation (Fenwick, 2004; Leca & Barin Cruz, 2021). This line of inquiry initiates the view that discourses promoting personal, career, and organizational development not be aimed primarily at bottom-line objectives of the organization but rather on behalf of worker well-being, organizational health, and workplace justice (Bierma, 2015). Management thus needs to reflect on their words and messages or otherwise unconsciously create a HRD that falls short of examining such critical assumptions as whose interests are being promoted; whose voices haven't been recognized, understood, legitimized and appreciated; whether available knowledge has been presented as contestable; or whether mainstream discourse has incorporated coverage of social, political and historical processes that underlie worker practices (Raelin, 2008).

A critical HRD would conversely explore a range of contested terrains of practice, such as any illusions of homogenous identities between workers and managers, regulation of worker behavior through classification, or subversion of diversity through isolation and standardized measurement systems (Fenwick, 2004; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003). One of the most oft-cited examples of contestable HR practices would be that of the performance appraisal and its related workplace remediation strategies of mentoring and counseling in which workers may unconsciously play an active role in their own control (Barratt, 2002). Townley (1994) is especially critical of these activities because they appear to encourage workers to reflect on and analyze their conduct, under the watchful gaze of an authoritative figure, and to correct or to reform themselves.

What is needed is a change in the practices and associated material elements that take into consideration, first, what workers are experiencing on the ground and, secondly, whether the institutional contexts surrounding the change support worker voice (Beunza & Ferraro, 2019; Fleming & Banerjee, 2016). This would require a public realization that leadership is situated within a broader set of geographic and political forces that acknowledges that worker agency can make a difference within the workplace, with the latter being considered a dialectical and contested space (Smolović Jones et al., 2022). Further, to effect institutional change at the organizational site, it is imperative to work simultaneously at broader strategic and public policy levels to sustain any local successes.

Although L-A-P has defined itself as a moment of change in the flow of practice, its contribution to social change has so far been limited, granting its exponents have been outspoken in prodding the conversation away from the single out-in-front actor to collective actions. Leadership-as-practice challenges the idea that agency appears separate from and outside of the social activity itself. Through legitimate social action, subordinated social groups may harness the power to resist colonizing discourses and govern themselves (Jimenez-Luque, 2021).

In spite of the professed emancipatory collective agenda espoused by L-A-P and critical HRD, a critical stance would point out that ostensibly successful leadership practices can produce unifying ideologies demanding willing compliance, hide overt or passive practices of dissent, and embed contested gender relations (Ybema & Horvers, 2017). There are all-too-common cases of despotic executive practices that juxtapose seemingly unifying and noble ideals using messianic messages and conformist rituals with the realities of intense surveillance, intimidation, and deception (Tourish & Willmott, 2023). Practices consequently evolve within particular historical and social contexts which in turn are shaped by social forces and institutions, incorporating time, space, and power. So-called governmentalities or cultural forces shape our ways of thinking and acting often in ways that are unconscious to ourselves and others (Foucault, 2007).

In response to these penetrating criticisms, as was pointed out earlier, through *co-development*, people discover and unfold from within themselves. They adopt effective opposition to corporate ideals through what Havel refers to as “inner emancipation” (Havel, 1985, p. 65). They thereupon take an inter-subjectivist view that constructs a collaborative understanding through the sharing and contesting of alternative views of themselves and of the world. They engage and organize with one another through both critical dialogue and critical action in which they seek to question their language and their practice. Learning and reflection, two special energies underlying the mobilization of authentic change within L-A-P, serve to sustain democratic ends through interactive contention among a community of inquirers (Raelin, 2007).

L-A-P’s Post-Humanistic Treatment of the Worker

Given the flat ontology of L-A-P and its position that the human being is not the center of all agency within an organization, it can be said that it relies more on post-humanism than humanism. Accordingly, in focusing on everyday entanglements, as noted earlier, it sees change as emerging from contested interaction among those engaged rather than from a single source of expertise. Thus, rather than rely upon virtues, values, or principles (other than recognizing that such moral elements are acquired and exercised in social practices), L-A-P looks to social processes, such as free and civil dialogue, to break down the dangerous discourses of complicity and conformity that disrupt the social life.

To consider some of the practices needed in today’s workforce, we acknowledge that organizations live today on the verge of the next impending crisis while having to operate in networks coordinated through information systems and human culture. With P2P (peer-to-peer), AI (artificial intelligence), and robotic technologies decentralizing operations while automating a fair degree of repetitive elements in the work environment, knowledge workers in particular can spend more time especially on creative processes. They also can enhance these processes through engagement in networked and social learning, assembling colleagues willing to improvise new solutions to new problems (Hult & Byström, 2022). So we need to consider practices that can promote

collaborative work cultures in which workers can flourish not only individually but in partnership with like-minded stakeholders and where they can contribute to improving their workplaces without depending on those in positions of authority. The skills required are consequently nonroutine and often have to be assembled rapidly to respond to unexpected interruptions using available resources (Berglund et al., 2024). The role of manager, in turn, needs to be in the sense of the facilitator who promotes widespread engagement serving as a resource to encourage workers through conditions of radical innovation, teamwork, and collaboration.

Managers accordingly need to respond to and address contemporary aversive conditions that plague workers to such a degree that they choose to leave their current place of work. In particular, workers become indignant to be asked to do work that is repetitive, monotonous, and exhausting, leading to *burnout* (Kumareswaran, 2023). At the same time, they are often not accorded sufficient *autonomy* over their own work, thus feeling increasingly disconnected from the job and handcuffed in contributing to the current digitalized workplace (Bal & Izak, 2021). This has a reciprocal effect of depreciating their sense of self and increasing their feeling of powerlessness. Consequently, workers experience a *detachment* from the work setting itself, perceiving little to no connection to the ultimate product or service to which they would otherwise be dedicated. Detachment also results from disconnection to the work setting when having to work remotely in performing so-called “platform work” in the gig economy without sufficient support from asynchronous communication or even from synchronous applications (Glavin et al., 2021).

Managers thus must increasingly become sensitive to the needs of workers in the contemporary organization who wish to feel valued and listened to while achieving a sense of shared meaning within their area of responsibility. In particular, as per such workplace analyses as those performed by Tummers et al. (2018) and Cardiff et al. (2020), workers wish to:

- engage in meaningful work that makes a difference to customers, stakeholders, and communities
- participate and actively contribute to decisions which affect them
- be trusted to take responsibility for their areas of expertise
- own their jobs and schedules and organize their linkage to ongoing cross-functional units and networks
- learn and grow as both contributors and corporate/community citizens
- contribute to building supportive communities inside and outside the workplace

The last three practices are familiar to HRD practitioners because they suggest the need to establish mutual learning relationships where people can engage in reflective practice, which entails such skills as challenging assumptions and inferences, exploring inter-subjective differences, and framing and reframing plans and meaning.

To accompany these skills of collective reflection, we add conditions considered fundamental for innovative work practices, namely:

- Psychological Empowerment
Commitment to determine the course and outcome of one's work without external oversight
- Creative Process Engagement
Interest in co-creation through the exploration of intersubjective differences and self-distanciation through dialogue
- Intrinsic Motivation
Interest in engaging in a task for the sake of the task itself, not its reward

In the case of empowerment, we're talking about real empowerment, not *bogus* empowerment, which is no more than a fiction or illusion of self-determination (Ciulla, 1998). Real empowerment, as in the instance of legitimate delegation, affords workers the opportunity to experience greater autonomy and independence. They are given the opportunity to question decisions, take risks, exchange knowledge, and control their own work free from fear. They are also empowered to choose who they wish to work with and how they prefer to communicate with them, especially within the flow of practice. They are also free to consult with others to help them produce a mutual leadership for the immediate work experience.

Workers who participate in creative process engagement are willing to cross their own disciplines and comfort zones to dynamically co-create with others in both problem solving and problem finding (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). They become internal entrepreneurs or intrapreneurs who take on an agile, startup mindset to attack new opportunities and do so without regard to ownership or boundaries, extending themselves beyond their immediate work setting (Hirudayaraj & Matić, 2021). At times in order to explore new territory, they may even have to take distance from their usual standard way of working – a proclivity referred to above as self-distanciation (Tsoukas, 2009). In their work endeavors, they may find themselves motivated not by any reward but by the simple means and ends of intrinsic accomplishment; in other words, they seek to do their job for the sake of the work itself and the joy, learning, growth, and the companionship that it provides.

Eline de Kok and her associates (de Kok et al., 2023) characterized many of the practices described above in their account of “rebel nurse leadership-as-practice.” In order to ensure that patient needs were met, the nurses had to find creative solutions to systemic problems. They often challenged the status quo by finding workarounds to overcome an outdated or inflexible routine. For example, in one case, a team of nurses feeling that they were losing a lot of time arranging a mattress for their patient because they needed to get a code from a supplier to unlock a cart, simply took their clogs off, climbed into a locked cart, pushed the mattresses out, and gave each other a high five! The final gesture suggested their intrinsic satisfaction with their deviating action. They had empowered themselves to improve an unworkable practice. The authors concluded that the workers in this case felt a sense of gratification when they acted on their fundamental beliefs and expertise even if their creative practice challenged some fundamental assumptions of the organization. Finally, the authors also recommended,

however, that a next step in nursing leadership-as-practice would be for the nurses to feel sufficiently comfortable to collectively reflect and speak out about some of the conflicting dilemmas in their daily practice so as to find a collaborative professional solution.

Limitations and Discussion

The special version of leadership and its impact that have been described in these prior pages can be implemented by degree. Leadership as a practice is in constant motion; the question is whether it can be brought front and center as a form of leadership that puts more emphasis on worker interaction and collaboration than on management direction. From this point, let's consider some of the limitations of applying the relatively new L-A-P approach and entertain the questions that need consideration before we move to any form of adoption. In particular, are there some workplaces that are more generative of this kind of leadership than others? How much freedom of motion might be provided in particular contexts? How might we overcome worker apathy and discontent that might see collective involvement in leadership as yet another requirement from management? Might there be variability by industry, type of organization, and worker skills, roles, commitments, or length of service?

These questions merit continuing research of workers' response to more collaborative forms of leadership. But as workers become more involved in decision making concerning their own work, what are the implications for management? Are they willing to cede control or even image in favor of collaborative action and interaction? If they were to adopt a role as a boundary resource, would it be endorsed and sanctioned by human resource policies? In the end, is the practice approach warranted in instances when human resource development and organizational performance appear healthy? Do we have sufficient evidence through research that an alternative leadership approach focusing on practice will be more effective than standard leadership?

Perhaps the most critical concern is the chance for abuse of the practice approach as some actors might attempt to exploit their power in a way inconsistent with the canons of social justice and equal opportunity. Might workers engage in self-censorship or even quiet sabotage if they were to feel disenfranchised from the dominant discourse? The hope, of course, is that workers would be given a chance to find their own voice, develop their own identity, and discover their human dignity as part of their search for livelihood and meaning. Any attempt to realign power distributions within the workplace would be made transparent and non-illusory. If any experiment in collective leadership-as-practice were to be conducted, all participants would need to acknowledge their own authority and sources of power such that no one would come to manipulate or dampen the expression of others. Every worker would be encouraged to set their own agenda while remaining open to the critical inquiry of others. As they discover and use their own voice, they would be invited to participate freely in public discourses because of their self-identified interests and their commitments to one other.

Conclusion

Design of the workplace, along with traditional understandings and norms, shape the practices which could be progressive or regressive to those working in the space. Although practices can be recurrent, they can be adapted by managers but also through the collective reflexivity and improvisation of workers, who can develop a degree of solidarity amongst themselves. In fact, such collective practices can form an intra-action which produces a dynamic emerging relation among the workers in response to each other. These practices can also change the trajectory of an existing practice in which we can say that leadership occurred. Was such a leadership, however, on behalf of a benevolent outcome? This axiological question is addressed in L-A-P through its genealogical roots that views ethics as co-constructed and negotiated in the flow of practice. Its base is derived from a belief in the innate capacity of people to engage in ethical agency unimpeded by rules and sustained by a profound respect of others and a commitment to one's community. The practice in question is one of co-development in which workers would take an inter-subjectivist collaborative view of their work through their sharing and contesting of alternative views of themselves and of the world. Applied to the workforce, such a leadership practice can promote work cultures encouraging workers to flourish not only individually but in collaboration with like-minded stakeholders. Given an increasingly digitalized workplace which can automate most repetitive tasks, workers are free to focus on the distinctly social, interactive practices assembling appreciative colleagues willing to improvise new solutions to new problems.

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