

UNPACKING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: A DANCE THAT CREATES EQUALS*

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The learning reflected here comes out of cycles of action-reflection taken up by our group to answer the question: *How can we create the space/opportunities for individuals to recognize themselves as leaders and develop leadership?* We explored a burning question shared by members of a group grappling with leadership in a very particular context – one that is grass roots and has an explicit agenda to challenge basic beliefs about the world. Because our goal is *social justice*, the leadership we want to develop is *social change leadership*. We are building power among welfare recipients, bringing diverse people and communities together through theater, fighting an entrenched mining industry to bring social and environmental justice to rural areas, organizing women prisoners to imagine a world without prisons, helping young Native Americans reclaim the power of their culture and history, and bringing together young women inside and outside the juvenile justice system to become leaders in their community.

We have focused on how we might create space/opportunities for people who are affected by the issue that our work addresses. Because affected populations have long been marginalized, this focus represents an explicit attempt to re-imagine who can be a leader. We believe that, with the right support and skill base, anyone can influence the world. Regardless of formal education or training, when people have personal life experience with an issue, they have a right to be at the table – to be a leader on that issue. This way, social justice work helps recognize the power people already have when they enter the door.

We used Cooperative Inquiry (CI) as the means to answer our question. This is a systematic type of inquiry that differs significantly from traditional research. Rather than researchers collecting data from “others”, the cooperative inquiry group creates collective knowledge based on the participating members' personal experience. Also, because each inquirer participates fully in all decisions that affect the inquiry, there is both co-production and co-ownership of the knowledge produced, with each member being co-subject and co-object of the research. In answering our question, we came together five times for 1 1/2 day long reflection sessions and each took on individual actions in our day to day work between meetings, to test and refine the hunches we developed collectively. For most of the action cycles we would each do a different action based on the same theme (e.g. observing the role of power in leadership relationships). Through these action-reflection cycles, the inquiry allowed us to, not only learn about our question, but through our actions, to actually create space for others in our communities to join with us in leadership. Ultimately the process has changed how we view ourselves and how we do our work.

Our inquiry

Our inquiry was born out of a larger program called Leadership for a Changing World (LCW).¹ The program includes a research and documentation component that uses three parallel streams of inquiry—ethnography, co-operative inquiry, and narrative inquiry—to explore questions related to the work of leadership. The program is committed to develop participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as the core activity of the research process.

Cooperative inquiry (CI) is a participatory research technique by which 7 to 9 participants of a group use their own experience to generate insights around an issue that is of burning concern to all. In this type of inquiry participants formulate a question, agree upon a course of action, individually engage in action through their work and then come back to collectively make meaning from the data generated by their actions. This cycle of reflection-action-reflection is repeated several times until the group feels they have successfully addressed their concern. Sometimes facilitators support the group to ensure that its members use the process to its full advantage. We have learned first hand what the literature on CI says: it contributes to create new knowledge grounded on practice, deepens the participants' leadership potential, and strengthens relationships among group members (Heron, 1996; Bray et al, 2001).

In our case, participants included both members of the Research and Documentation team who served as initiators and facilitators of the group, and social change leaders who were either LCW award recipients or members of the LCW awardee organizations. Here is a brief description of each participant in his or her own words:

Cassandra: I am the Co-Director of Justice Now, an organization in Oakland, California that works with women in prison. Justice Now is a training center which provides direct legal services to women in prison and supports organizers inside and outside of prison. The broad goals of Justice Now are to challenge the prison industrial complex in all of its forms and to promote a long-term vision of a world without prisons.

Barbara: I am the director of the Silver Valley Community Resource Center, an organization working to educate and organize the community living in the largest Superfund site in the United States, to hold EPA and other political officials accountable for cleanup of more than 1500 sq. miles of millions of tons of mine waste including lead and arsenic accumulated over a century of time.

Bethany: I served as Associate Project Director for the Research and Documentation component of LCW during this inquiry. I came to that work with experience in community based non-profit organizations and an interest in participatory forms of research. I entered the inquiry in the role of facilitator.

Denise: I am a Passamaquoddy woman who works with Wabanaki youth in Maine around issues of culture, leadership, oppression, history. I work with the American Friends Service Committee.

¹ Leadership for a Changing World is an awards and recognition program sponsored by the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Washington D.C. based Advocacy Institute and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

Mark: I am the Associate Artistic Director of Cornerstone Theater Company. Cornerstone works in and with communities throughout the country, creating plays about specific communities with members of that community. I also have a formal education in theater, as well as experience in theater administration.

LaDon: I am a campaign organizer at the Center for Community Change. I have over nine years of community organizing experience. I am the former co-chair of the board of directors of Community Voices Heard, a membership organization of low-income individuals and families working collectively to influence policy change around issues that impact our lives.

Lateefah: I began working with other low income young women in San Francisco at age 17. Now 26, I am the director of the Center for Young Women's Development, which works to bring together girls in the juvenile justice system to positively benefit their communities.

Sonia: I designed and direct the research and documentation component of LCW with a team of colleagues from a graduate school of public service, where I also teach. I came to the CI with a commitment to participatory research and a desire to learn more about how to create good theory from practice.

Tyletha: I started with Community Voices Heard as a member turned active leader. I went on to an organizer trainee position, and finally an organizer at Community Voices Heard, working to empower low-income people and people on public assistance.

Leadership Development: a Shift in the Leadership Relationship

The Starting Point: Leadership as a Relationship - Early on, we realized that in talking about leadership we were not referring to individual acts as in a traditional notion of leadership. Instead, most of the stories we shared dealt with the details of close working relationships with individuals in our organizations and communities.

Stepping back and stepping up: a shift in the relationship - It was in exploring what needs to happen for leadership to be shared, that we saw the need to encourage a genuine shift in the relationship, in which **someone steps back** (whether they do it consciously or not) and **someone steps up**, (in our conversations we've termed the latter *crossing over*). We are very clear that these two actions are linked but not necessarily sequential.

Different levels at which the relationship shift happens - The shift that we call leadership development is not limited to one-on-one leadership relationships. We shared stories based on our actions that indicated at least three levels at which the shift can happen.

- First, the leadership relationship may shift in an organizational context in which there is a formal leadership role that has been defined. For example, when the Director of Mark's theater company was out of the state for several months working on a project, he stepped back simply by being out of the office, and Mark stepped up to play the role of formal leader in his absence.

- Second, the shift may occur on a daily basis or one-to-one. We found that this kind of continuous negotiation of the relationship happens most often in the context of an organization where the mission involves developing leadership in a particular group. Cassandra's work with women prisoners and Tyletha and LaDon's work with women on welfare is targeted at helping the women develop leadership, so the process of stepping up and back is on-going.
- Finally, the shift can even happen when you don't have a particular person in mind but you do your work in such a way that it leaves room for others to step up and be part of the leadership that is happening. Barbara chose to remain silent in a key meeting with EPA administrators. Her hope was that other members of her organization would speak for the group and that by adding new voices their effort would gain new leadership and strength. Because she took time to prepare them thoroughly for the meeting and then clearly stepped back, they stepped up into a leadership position.

The Role of Power - Perhaps the most difficult issue with which we have grappled is the role of power in our leadership relationships. Although it has been difficult, we recognized that there is inequality in these relationships and that it is important to recognize the power dynamic. We have noticed through our actions that one person starts with a choice to create or not create space for others to recognize themselves as leaders and develop leadership.

By acknowledging this power dynamic we also acknowledge that in most cases the leadership relationship is asymmetrical, that is, both sides do not start with the same power. The asymmetry of the leadership relationship is neither simply a natural occurrence nor is it just created in the specific context. We suspect it comes from the way our society functions and from the inequalities this produces – the very inequalities against which we are working. We rebalance this asymmetry by practicing a type of leadership that makes it possible for us to shift power to those whose power has not been recognized. We are not granting power to the powerless, but rather we are recognizing and supporting the power that people have within themselves already. Perhaps it is our particular worldview – based in a commitment to social justice – that frees us to do leadership development in this unique way.

Stepping back: when one decides to open space

Stepping back has to do with moving from a place where one provides direction, to a place where one holds back, so that others can do the work or hold the public spotlight. Stepping back, however, is not about granting space, but about opening space, so others can claim it. It is also about broadening space, so that others can join in the work. In stepping back the person can gain perspective on his or her work.

The positive effects of stepping back - With respect to the impact on the work, observing the consequences of the deliberate efforts to step back lead us to believe that it can be positive for the “cause” we are fighting for. Done responsibly, stepping back can help build power.

For Lateefah, stepping back from the office helped her gain perspective as she viewed her role differently. Through the experience she learned that as the formal leader of the organization she had to pay attention not only, nor primarily to making sure that the organization functioned (raising money, grants) but to making the organization a place where people wanted to be. This

related to issues such as cultivating people, “teaching” them to do things and especially promoting rituals that give meaning to the work and that they could perpetuate when she leaves. As she reflected on her deliberate intention to step back, she saw her role shifting away from mostly figuring out administrative issues to counting on others who are good at it to do the work—supervising administrative functions – and helping them use a “program” rather than an administration lens. She concluded that leadership included “cultivating” the organization too, helping people create space for them selves, and developing values and ethics so that people feel safe and included.

The risks of stepping back - In exploring the benefits of stepping back we also identified some risks in doing so. We also realized that it is worth taking these risks, as stepping back is the only way to create the space. One risk is that people who step up take the work in a different direction than one hoped, that is, we acknowledge that one may lose control over the outcomes of the work. We saw this in Denise’s story of the group she organized to work on substance abuse issues in her community. As she stepped back, the group took a path that she was uncomfortable with, so she decided to leave the group, whose members continued to do the work.

Stepping back before others are ready to step up brings additional risks. One great risk is creating a vacuum if no one steps up. As Cassandra reminds us, stepping back without someone to step up is “checking out.” It is not leadership. By the same token, it is possible that stepping up without someone stepping back can be about “taking over” rather than sharing leadership. Sharing leadership deliberately requires paying attention to this risk.

When stepping back is done deliberately, doing it well requires doing your homework before. This means helping create the conditions for others to be prepared to step up. At the same time, doing it well requires providing needed support for those who will step up.

Stepping back and the dynamics of power - As we have said, because opening or broadening one’s space is something that happens in relationship, and it has consequences for all involved, there is great responsibility in stepping back. Because stepping back is a decision to do something that will affect another, there is power involved in deciding to do so.

Acknowledging the power dynamic in the relationship means accepting some privilege and also some responsibility with the other in the relationship, which produces discomfort/anxiety. Acknowledging and owning this discomfort creates an awareness that we believe, may be a necessary condition to step back. Acknowledging the discomfort and being transparent about it both contribute to help create the conditions for stepping back responsibly.

Because leadership is a relationship, stepping back is important to create the space/opportunities for others to recognize themselves as leaders and develop their leadership. However, by itself it constitutes only one half of the answer to our question. For people to develop their leadership, they must step up as others step back.

Stepping Up: Claiming One’s Authority and Leadership

Stepping up – recognizing oneself as a leader and developing leadership – requires what the group has called crossing over. Crossing over happens when a person gives him or herself the authority to act as a leader.

The shift in the leadership relationship that results in leadership development does not happen by accident. It is an intentional process. In our conversations we have noticed that we are conscious of when we choose to back away from some aspect of our leadership role in order to make space for others. We believe that leaders must take the risk of stepping back in order to see whether others are ready to be leaders, in other words, to see whether they are ready to step up. What happens once others have stepped up depends on the particular people involved and the context (e.g. co-leading, taking over, stepping back up).

Crossing over is different from being empowered. It is not something that is granted by others, but something that we claim for ourselves. Once people claim a space by crossing over there is a re-framing of the way they see themselves in the world. They have taken up their authority to influence others. Only in one person stepping back and another crossing over can the power dynamic truly shift in this way. In this relationship, the shift is irreversible. Once you have “crossed over” you will never be the same. As Tyletha says, “They can’t take my leadership away.”

In exploring the conditions that contribute to make this shift in the context of social justice leadership, we identified, among others, the following:

- Personal transformation and healing
- Faith in the power of personal experience
- Readiness
- Need for support (safe space)

Personal Transformation and Healing - In order to cross over, a person must move beyond the fear and shame that come from personal experience with the issue in the context of an oppressive society. At times the oppression runs so deep and is experienced for so many years that it becomes internalized. When oppression is internalized people begin to believe the negative stereotypes society attributes to them and the fear and shame are magnified. We have identified this fear and shame as a primary barrier to people recognizing themselves as leaders and developing leadership. We have talked about the process of overcoming internalized oppression in terms of people recognizing their own humanity and regaining faith in their capacity to change the world. Denise relates this to her own experience providing the leadership to start the “Silent Cry” group, a group of women who were all victims of abuse. “If I didn’t do my own healing work, I could have never done it,” she said in our conversation about where we came from to do our leadership work.

Faith in the power of personal experience - Beyond this healing described above, stepping up or crossing over also involves claiming personal experience of oppression as a source of authority to speak to the issue and guide the process toward changing the situation. When people speak from personal experience with oppression, they are able to recognize themselves in a new role. This recognition is central to their ability to assert themselves in the role of leader. LaDon told us a story of the welfare recipient who is now a leader and who was then ready to step back in a meeting with a Congressperson to allow other women to speak from their experience. This story shows us how far this process can take someone. She not only claimed her personal experience as a source of authority, but she was also eventually able to step back and make space for others to do the same.

Readiness - Based on our personal experience and what we've observed of others through our actions, we believe that if people are ready to step up and the opportunity is not there in your organization, they'll go find the space someplace else. During one action cycle, Denise did a workshop with young people. The workshop was meant as a place for them to get to know each other. In the beginning, she opened the floor to anyone who wanted to tell their story. One girl started and told a tragic, painful story. The others immediately followed her lead. Denise reflected, "I see her as taking that space without me intentionally giving it to her, I opened the space for any member of the group. She would have taken space wherever she could find it. She was ready."

Need for support (safe space) - In recounting where she came from to do this work, Tyletha remembered that she stepped up originally because someone gave her the confidence and the support. Someone gave her the opportunity and she took it. If they hadn't given her the opportunity, she wouldn't have realized she could step up. They let her know that she was the expert. They created the space for her to see that – she didn't know that before. We would argue that for people to feel ready to step up, they need support or a safe space in which to develop confidence in them selves.

Conclusion

Based on the stories we have shared with each other from our past experience and from our specific actions in the inquiry group, and based on the further reflections they triggered as reported in this paper, we offer a list of tools we believe are critical for those interested in doing leadership development.

Information dissemination – sharing information about the issue can help with the process of moving from awareness to consciousness. It also provides the preparation necessary for people to feel confident to step up. Information can be disseminated in many different ways. Barbara, for example, recognized herself as an expert in the "politics of the grocery line".

Dialogue – genuine dialogue does not eradicate the power dynamic that exists in a leadership relationship, but it does open the door to people working together over the long term. Cassandra defines dialogue as listening to how each makes sense of their actions and searching for common space without denying the validity of each others' point of view.

Respect and listening – support from an individual, organization, or community that sincerely cares about the people who are crossing over makes it possible for them to take necessary risks in order to develop leadership. In Lateefah's experience, the support that comes from this caring will allow the person to be comfortable to be who they are, and gain confidence to step up. At the same time, there must also be mutual understanding and a shared vision of the goals of the work.

Story telling – sharing stories of personal experiences with the issue helps people recognize themselves and others in the leadership relationship. This is an important mechanism that helps people cross over: "My story got heard, and something happened", said Tyletha, in recognizing the power of this tool in her own transformation. By telling one's own story and having others

listen, one goes beyond one's own self, joins others with similar experiences, and can see the connection to broader issues.

Acknowledging our anxiety/discomfort – owning the anxiety and discussing it can help people become more aware of the role that power plays. Feeling uncomfortable with the asymmetry of the leadership relationship is a motivating factor for someone to step back. Acknowledging the anxiety this generates is important to building an authentic relationship. Hence the anxiety/discomfort about power to allow spaces is an important aspect of leadership. Mark and Cassandra ask whether in fact, if this anxiety did not exist, would there be less leadership? The group seems to agree that this is the case.

Open direction – keeping the direction of an effort open to change by people who claim the space adds to the power of the shift in a leadership relationship. LaDon is testing this idea in her work with welfare recipients to see what happens in terms of creating space if she lets the women's stories define the direction of the campaign rather than looking for their stories to fit a pre-defined campaign.

The actions we agreed to do in our communities, the reflections on the consequences of those actions and their implications for our question lead us into a process of collective thinking that helped create new insights about the nature of leadership, leadership development and about ourselves. Learning about each other's work, sharing stories and supporting each other as we continued to struggle with the challenges of our work, we believe that ultimately this process has transformed how we view ourselves and how we do our work.

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