

LEADERSHIP (RE)CONSTRUCTED: HOW LENS MATTERS

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Abstract: This paper develops a view of leadership as a social construct, as something that is created through dialogue among groups of people in a particular context. Different contexts allow us to see how leadership emerges in action. We further develop the idea that leadership is *relational* to highlight its social and collective nature and to stress the importance of studying leadership in context. The way people make meaning of leadership is an important focus, so it becomes necessary to understand the “knowledge principle,” or dominant ideas that inform the work of leadership, as well. This approach contributes to the development of the body of literature that views leadership as a collective achievement, not something that belongs to an individual. Not only does this approach hold promise to provide interesting new insights to enrich leadership theory, it allows for the opportunity to produce new knowledge that is useful to practitioners, thereby enhancing existing leadership and inspiring new leadership to emerge.

INTRODUCTION

Pre and post September 11, 2001, this country and this world have been fascinated by the topic of leadership. In this country at least, we have been wishing we could have more of it, especially in our civic life. We spent a fair amount of time before September 11th anyway, thinking that our great leaders were past leaders (John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King) and that “we” needed now more of what they offered: vision, passion, an ability to move people. The Ford Foundation and in particular its president Susan Berresford have long had a different view. As she and they moved around the world, they saw a lot of leadership and wondered why others couldn’t or didn’t see what they saw. Because they were a foundation and because they were the Ford Foundation they decided to challenge the prevailing wisdom. They created a program called *Leadership for a Changing World* that had among its goals to change the conversation about leadership in this country.

Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) is an awards program. It acknowledges and celebrates leadership that is tackling tough social problems in ways that are inclusive, effective, strategic, and creative. (www.leadershipforchange.org). Beginning Fall 2001, the Foundation, through the Advocacy Institute, its partner in this effort, is awarding twenty \$100,000 sums annually (plus additional funds for specific developmental

activities). By highlighting these stories of leadership that make a difference it hopes to convince people that leadership “abounds.” The Foundation decided to support a research agenda to complement the awards program and, with the Advocacy Institute, selected the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at NYU as the research partner.

Our task was to invent a research agenda that would contribute to changing the conversation. The partnership involved in LCW (the Ford Foundation, the Advocacy Institute, the Wagner School and OMG, who will evaluate the overall effort) agreed early on that one way to approach the challenge of getting people to see all the leadership that did in fact exist, was to challenge their view of what constituted leadership. All definitions of leadership – no matter how different they are – include the idea that leadership happens when there is a collective need to accomplish something, that is, a need for purposive action (see, for example, Burns, 1978; Rost, 1993; Heifetz, 1994; Bryson and Crosby, 1992; and Drath, 2001). But if we see leadership existing only when we see heroic individuals acting on the national stage, for example, we miss much of the leadership that exists – in communities, across fields, in teams, through collaboration.

We could have entered the leadership definition debate, as many others before us have. Instead we suggest that it is more helpful to explore leadership using a different lens from that which has been traditionally used. We understand leadership as a social construct, as something the meaning of which is created through dialogue among groups of people in a particular context. In this paper we attempt to “unpack” what it means to look at leadership as a social construct. In particular we further develop the idea that leadership is *relational* (Drath, 2001; Gergen, 1994; Murrell 1997), highlight its social and collective nature, stress the importance of studying leadership in *context* and then discuss how groups struggle with what we call *meaning making*. Throughout our discussion, we highlight the contemporary work on leadership that serves as a foundation for our thinking. Having argued the case for studying leadership as a social construct, we review what Drath has called the dominant “knowledge principles” (Drath, 2001) that have undergirded peoples’ views of leadership.

While there are other legitimate ways to study leadership, we believe that this approach will help us to build critically, constructively and creatively on the existing work in the leadership field. In particular, this lens offers the opportunity to challenge the literature's previous emphasis on the person defined as the "leader". It will help us explore the ways people understand and attribute leadership and allow us to distinguish between the emergence of the collective practices that constitute the work of leadership and the individuals involved in those practices. By highlighting these dimensions, we hope to contribute to the development of the body of literature that views leadership as a collective achievement, or the property of a group, rather than something that belongs to an individual (Drath, 2001; Eisold, 1995; Feyerherm, 1994; Luke, 1998; Murrell, 1997). In this paper we report on the product of our intention to make explicit our assumptions so we can be reflective as we enter the inquiry. We are aware that our perspective will influence our decisions about where and to what we pay attention. It will sensitize us to particular dimensions of the work of leadership in each community we plan to study. Making explicit our perspective will also prepare us to be open and respectful as we encounter other views of leadership in the field, and as we engage in dialogue with the participants of the program to try to capture together their leadership experience using our proposed research design¹.

We also hope to offer a research-based way out of the dilemma with which we began. If it is the "knowledge principle" or frame that we hold that determines what we see when we look for leadership, then using a new frame or lens will indeed allow us to see more. The stories that come to mind when we talk about leadership using this new lens will have unfamiliar characters and plot lines and settings. The background music will be different, the lighting will bring new images forward while leaving others in the shadows. Indeed, if our ambitious hopes are realized, we will have joined others in rewriting a very critical story: the story of what we mean when we talk about leadership.

¹ For papers describing our conceptual framework and research design, see the Research and Documentation link on www.leadershipforchange.org.

LEADERSHIP AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

The relational or social nature of leadership as a social construction

A constructionist perspective presumes that our understanding of leadership is socially constructed overtime, as individuals interact with one another, rather than being something embodied in individuals or possessed by them. This perspective is not entirely new in the leadership literature. Organizational scholars like Pfeffer (1977), Smircich and Morgan (1982), Smircich (1983), and Tierney (1987, 1997) have pursued the idea that leadership emerges from the constructions and actions of people in organizations.

According to this perspective, leadership becomes a reality when one or more individuals in a social system succeed in framing and defining how the demands of the group will be taken up, and who will address the need for direction in collective action. Through a process of attribution, people agree to assign each other different roles and functions, including the role of leader, to help move the work forward, or to satisfy other social needs (Hunt, 1984; Meindl, 1985, 1995).

Pushing this idea to its limit, Pastor (1998) views leadership as “a collective social consciousness that emerges in the organization” as individuals interact with one another (p. 5). But Pastor also acknowledges that leadership is not just a mental construct. As this process of social construction goes on, as people develop a shared understanding of the work and the roles assigned to members in pursuing it, leadership takes on an independent life that continues to be enacted over time. In this sense, as it emerges, leadership becomes the property of the social system, rather than being just a shared idea in people’s minds.

A social and relational approach to leadership highlights the idea that these meaning-making processes and the attributions of leadership do not just occur in people’s minds, but instead, they are always social, rooted in social interaction. An understanding of cognition as a social process helps to clarify this logic. Scholars in the MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences argue that the way our cognitive structures develop and

function is always grounded or embedded in the social world. We access our values and make sense of the world through a process that is located in humanly constructed settings, and therefore this process is social rather than individual. In addition, because the material aspects of the setting are significant for the way sense-making and other cognitive processes develop, these scholars suggest that cognition is more than just a rational process of the mind; it is embodied. That cognition is social and embodied implies then, that it is concrete rather than abstract. In other words, the physical constraints that we face are relevant to how we make sense of the world. Moreover, because cognition is engaged rather than detached, an ongoing interaction with our surrounding environment, including other people, is central to sense making. Finally, context – and hence identifiable contingencies – affects how people comprehend the world and how they respond to it making cognition specific rather than general.

Therefore, an important contribution of a relational approach to leadership is to call attention to the implications of the idea that leadership belongs to a community rather than to an individual. A relational approach sensitizes the analyst to the dangers of confusing leadership with the person who is identified as the leader (Rost, 1993; Vanderslice, 1988) and challenges the assumption that leadership must be embodied in the leader-follower relationship, an assumption that greatly reduces the scope of what constitutes the work of leadership. In this alternative approach, the only way to understand how leadership happens is “by entering into the community and inquiring into the shared meaning-making languages and processes of the community” (Drath, p. 49). This requires attention to the nature of the challenges the community faces as they are trying to achieve their common purpose and the ways people from the community make sense of those challenges.

This relational view of leadership is present, implicitly or explicitly, in what we view as some of the most insightful contemporary work on leadership. For example, Burns’ seminal work (1978) starts with the premise that leadership, like power, is “relational, collective and purposeful” (pg. 18). Similarly, by focusing on leadership as activities that stem from a collective challenge, Heifetz’s ground-breaking work directs attention away

from an exclusive focus on the “leader” to consider also the acts of leadership, leadership in process, and the public aspects of leadership work.

Heifetz characterizes leadership as “the activity of a citizen from any walk of life mobilizing people to do something” (1994, p. 20). To understand the relational and social nature of this definition, we must consider that the “something” done is of a particular nature. Heifetz distinguishes between technical and adaptive work, where adaptive work “requires a change in values, beliefs or behavior” (p.22). He aligns leadership with adaptive work. Adaptive work happens when people experience a gap between the reality they face and the values for which they stand. Challenges that produce this gap force people into a learning process as they address the contradiction, and engage in resolving the conflict. It is this work of people engaged together, that Heifetz calls the work of leadership. This seems quite consistent with the relational approach, especially if we acknowledge that, while closing the gap may appear to be the result of individual cognitive work, this work is grounded in social interaction and produces action.

However, Heifetz then devotes the bulk of his attention to the work of a single person developing the strategy to help others take responsibility for the adaptive challenges they face. By doing so, it appears as if the work of leadership is primarily the work of that single person devising the strategy, an activity that happens prior to and independent of the group’s engagement in adaptive work. While Heifetz is also interested in exploring the extent to which the community is open to examine conflicts over values and the morality of various means to solve the challenge, thereby directing his attention away from a single strategist (his leader) and toward the “others” (p. 25), Heifetz does not take the relational frame to its ultimate consequences. A shift in focus from the strategist and the way he or she develops the strategy, to the process by which the group engages in making meaning together, might yield even more fruit. A relational approach would motivate additional questions for Heifetz’ framework, such as: How does a community clarify what matters most? What stakeholders participate in this clarification process? What types of difficulties does the community experience when doing adaptive work (not

just the difficulties of the strategist to mobilize others)? How does the tendency to avoid the distress typical of adaptive work show in a particular community and how is it handled? These questions may require identifying the extent to which the roles of leadership concentrate on a single person, but it is not a given, and must be answered in context. In fact, a critical empirical question is: If one person becomes responsible for clarifying the adaptive strategy, how and why does that happen?

Other contemporary work on leadership calls attention to the social and collective nature of leadership. Lambert et al (1995) define leadership as “the reciprocal process that enables participants in [a] community to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose” (p. 32). He continues, “[s]ince leadership represents a possible set of actions for everyone in the community, anyone can choose to lead” (p. 50). In this definition, the leader as such is absent and is replaced by a community whose individual members have the potential to engage in leadership acts (not roles). While not empirically based, this approach to leadership highlights the importance of community, reciprocity and purpose for understanding leadership, making more explicit its social and relational aspects.

Other scholars focus on the relational aspects of collective or shared leadership. Bennis and Biederman (1997) and their associates document cases of shared leadership and co-leadership as types that differ considerably from the individual model. Chrislip and Larson (1994) as well as Huxham and Vangen (2000) describe a different type of leadership in the collaborative processes they study. They suggest that collaborative leadership creates the conditions and mechanisms for people themselves to do the work they need to do to address their collective problems. This represents a more shared model of leadership. Finally, in their work on public leadership, Terry (1993), Bryson and Crosby (1992), Crosby (1999), and Luke (1998) suggest that the interconnectedness of contemporary society demands a different kind of leadership to address public problems, one that is more collective than individual. All of these authors address important aspects of shared leadership, but more empirical work needs to be done to develop further the idea that leadership belongs to, and is embedded in, community.

In identifying and documenting a type of leadership that differs substantially from the positional leadership model drawn from traditional hierarchical organizational contexts, these scholars provide the impetus to question the extent to which leadership can be conceptualized in a single way. Similarly, our approach invites us to appreciate a range of alternative ways in which leadership emerges in action. In this sense, individual and shared models of leadership represent different forms members in a community of practice may choose as they take up their work. What form leadership takes in a community is, then, an empirical question. Understanding the conditions and circumstances associated with each type can yield important theoretical and practical insights about the nature of leadership.

The Importance of Context

Traditional leadership studies have tended to focus on specific contexts at the exclusion of others. Allen (1990) finds that multiple voices of leadership have been excluded from the existing literature, in part because most empirical studies have based their methodologies on the traditional understanding of leadership. Scholars have too often looked for leadership only in the expected places, usually in hierarchical organizations or systems. Allen identifies three assumptions underlying the most typical sampling techniques to study leadership: sampling by position, by individual reputation or by organizational success. The first assumption is that leadership happens at the top of the hierarchy, in formal positions, and can be enacted only with organizational authority or power resources. The second assumption is that there is a shared cultural definition of leadership. The third assumption is that there is a direct cause-effect relationship between the leadership of a single individual and success. Reliance on these assumptions and the consequent choice of sampling criteria, argues Allen, decreases the diversity of views of leadership because it reduces the pool from which to sample. Most people studied using these techniques are members of dominant groups with only a limited representation of women and people of color who have been successful in negotiating the traditional hierarchical system. Hence this author argues for the need to “look where we have not

looked before” (p. 8) to better understand leadership and to expand our present knowledge of it.

We would go even further in our critique to challenge another assumption of traditional studies, that is, the idea that the study of leadership requires focusing on the leaders. Both a constructionist perspective and an approach that highlights the relational nature of leadership give priority to the collective experience of sense-making as the work evolves. This suggests that individual traits, styles, or behaviors, as well as independent activities, processes or relationships, can help us understand leadership only if they are formed within the on-going work of a given community to pursue a collective purpose. The focus is less on individuals and more in the work of individuals collectively engaged in giving meaning to their actions. This approach suggests the need to look for *instances* of peoples’ experience in doing the work of leadership as the place where our lens should focus, or as the preferable *units* of analysis for studying leadership. We argue that Allen’s suggestion of looking elsewhere should include not only looking at different kinds of people, but most importantly, looking at different kinds of contexts and paying greater attention to the nature and content of work in these contexts.

We assert that we can better explore the nature of leadership today in certain social and organizational contexts outside of the mainstream management domains within which most of the literature has worked. Examples of these contexts are community-based and alternative organizations and groups connected to social movements, as well as networks of organizations engaged in civic reform. They have in common the fact that the tasks of direction, commitment and adaptation--critical concepts in leadership that will developed below--cluster around the goal of social change. Therefore, the challenges are characterized by high degrees of uncertainty, complexity and often hostility from the environment. They also share an aspiration from those involved in the work to embody democratic values, pursue human dignity and citizenship, and a commitment to work for the common good (Evans and Boyte, 1986; Bryson and Crosby, 1992; Terry, 1993). Learning about leadership in these contexts will contribute new insights to the theory and practice of leadership.

Leadership as meaning-making

If a constructionist lens allows us to understand leadership as a social construct, it also lets us see that leadership exists in reality to fulfill a social function; it is something that happens when people construct meaning in action. According to Drath and his associates from the Center for Creative Leadership, leadership emerges when a community makes sense of events and circumstances as it invents and pursues its activities (Drath and Palus, 1994; Palus and Horth, 1996, Schall, 1995.) In other words, leadership happens when people in a community create a shared understanding of their mutual and moral obligations so that their common cause is realized (Drath, 2001).

It has been twenty years since Smircich and Morgan (1982) posed an invitation to pursue this approach: “A focus on the way meaning in organized settings is created, sustained, and changed provides a powerful means of understanding the fundamental nature of leadership as a social process” (p. 261). While promising, this line of thinking has not been translated into research that would produce empirically grounded insights about the nature of leadership. What is most helpful about constructionist perspectives on leadership, however, is the notion that existing mental models of leadership emerged out of collective processes of meaning making developed in context, and they have then taken a life of their own. The dominant models that define today’s theory and practice of leadership reflect the values and assumptions of the model of organizing that predominated in the twentieth century: bureaucratic, hierarchical and patriarchal in nature (Rost, 1993). We propose to start our research with a different understanding of leadership. Wilfred Drath (2001) offers us a bridge by reviewing what he calls the dominant knowledge principles underlying our notions of leadership over time.

KNOWLEDGE PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP

To understand leadership in a community one must uncover what Drath calls the *knowledge principle* the community is using as it engages in the work of leadership.

Knowledge principle refers to the dominant, underlying, and taken-for-granted set of ideas and rules about how to best deal with the tasks of leadership, and that give social meaning to particular manifestations of leadership. Drath calls these shared understandings about leadership “knowledge principles” because they represent successful formulas people have found to address the demands of collective work. Using these principles gives content to the way leadership tasks are interpreted and approached in a given community, and each knowledge principle represents distinct and qualitatively different shared meanings of what constitutes leadership.

Drath argues that any group of persons involved in accomplishing something collectively face three crucial tasks: setting direction to the work, creating and maintaining commitment to the work, and adapting to the challenges that appear on the way (the latter refers to Heifetz’ adaptive challenges). If a group does not respond to these demands, Drath argues, it will not survive to serve its purpose. These are, thus, the tasks that call for leadership. Paying attention to the way a community addresses these three tasks represents a helpful way to explore how leadership happens.

First, setting direction means articulating the destination and path to achieve the community's goals, as well as framing the work. This task helps people know roughly where they are going, why they are doing it and how it will happen. It also explains and reminds the community of its origin and keeps a sense of purpose alive in the group. Second, being committed helps people find the cohesion, coordination, and investment needed to keep going, and stay aligned when obstacles appear. It also provides sustainability, continuity and unity over time. And finally, adaptation ensures the group’s long-term viability. It also provides the space for finding ways around problems that are hard to define or do not have pre-fixed solutions, and allows people to adapt creatively to move forward.²

² Drath acknowledges that these three tasks help provide a compact definition of what triggers a call for leadership in a group, and that they encompass a broader range of tasks articulated in the literature such as defining mission, setting goals, articulating a vision, motivating people, creating alignment, mobilizing resources, managing change and so forth. He claims that all of these could be classified as an aspect of one of these three core tasks.

According to Drath, the meaning and the content of the tasks of direction, commitment and adaptation may differ from community to community, and this difference relates to the knowledge principle underlying the community's agreements about how to address their collective challenges, as they make sense of their work. Drath argues that three knowledge principles, personal dominance, interpersonal influence and relational dialogue, have emerged progressively over time, as society has become more complex and the simpler tools of sense making hit the limit of usefulness. These principles can also be found contemporaneously or in combination, because the principle that helps solve more complex challenges incorporates elements of the principles used to address simpler challenges.

We would argue that the three "knowledge principles" Drath describes roughly correspond to the dominant approaches to the study of leadership that have evolved over time. After all, leadership scholars are part of the communities within which different knowledge principles are agreed upon and gain dominance. The early focus on traits, behaviors and styles in leadership studies, for example, may reflect the use of "personal dominance" as the knowledge principle that underlined the demands typical of the early industrial age (Cyert 1990, McCauley and Hughes 1991). This principle emerges when people agree to understand leadership as the personal quality of a type of person called leader, who acts toward and upon another type of person, a follower. In this view, a dominant figure is the source of leadership and takes the role as the leader. Followers are on the receiving end of this relationship. Mental models or metaphors of leadership in the form of the heroic figure or the strong, authoritarian leader are illustrative of this knowledge principle.

The more recent focus in the literature on processes and relationships suggests recognition of situations and contexts where "interpersonal influence" was called for (Rost, 1993; Conger 1989). This knowledge principle appears when the complexity of the system poses challenges that cannot be solved exclusively through dominance. Instead, leadership emerges from a process of negotiation among different actors with

different perspectives, until an individual or a group positions itself as the most influential actor and enacts the particular role of leader. Leadership does not reside in the person but in the *role* occupied by an influential person. Followers accept that role in the process of negotiation. Mental models of leadership as the visionary leader, the manager of meaning, and strong, charismatic leadership come to mind.

As these two knowledge principles are insufficient to meet even more complex challenges, accomplishing the work of leadership will require using a different principle and meaning-making tool, what Drath calls *relational dialogue*. Under this principle, leadership emerges when people with differing world views use dialogue and collaborative learning to create spaces where a shared common purpose can be achieved while the diversity of perspectives is preserved and valued. *Leadership, then, does not reside in a person or in a role, but in the social system.* When this knowledge principle is in operation, different people participate differently in the process of leadership, which happens when collaborative forms of thought and action become the predominant model to accomplish the group's purpose. The discovery of contingencies and the importance of context to explain leadership styles and behaviors in some contemporary work – as well as some of the early constructionist perspectives on leadership – represent an implicit understanding that leadership results from a social agreement in a specific context. This is consistent with the relational insight that each leadership principle springs from a degree of uncertainty and complexity in the social system within which people are trying to achieve a common purpose.

The practice of "relational dialogue" has been documented in recent literature using different terms. This is evidenced by the increasing importance given to concepts like dialogue, collaboration, and shared and dispersed leadership in contemporary theories of leadership (Crosby, 1999; Gronn, 1999; Goldman and Kahnweiler, 2000; Hesselbein, Goldsmith and Somerville, 1999; and Lipman-Blumen, 1996). So far, these elements are viewed and defined as isolated behaviors and processes linked to traits and styles of leaders rather than providing the base for a more integrated framework.

Kaczmariski and Cooperrider (1997) may represent an example of incipient attempts to formulate a more coherent approach to this knowledge principle in action. Focusing on the agenda of social change for global transformation, these authors argue that the kind of cooperative work required today demands a type of leadership that helps bridge the diverse knowledge systems, that is, cultures of inquiry that are typical of the global commons. The authors define leadership as the “art of creating contexts of appreciative interchange whereby people from different traditions of knowing come together to create a new culture of valuing in which differences are embraced rather than being a source of dominance and conformity pressures” (p. 251). This type of leadership, they argue, is required where “multiple voices, perspectives and truths are involved and the complexities of organizing are most unfathomable” (p. 256).

Drath observes that relational dialogue is the newest and least developed knowledge principle, both in the theory and practice of leadership. We would agree that it is the least developed in the theory of leadership. Yet, leadership practices based on the relational dialogue principle may not be so novel as their absence in the mainstream literature would suggest. Emerging literature of collaborative work to address public problems for example, provide some evidence of this principle in action, particularly in contexts characterized by high degrees of complexity, uncertainty, and change. The lack of recognition of this knowledge principle of leadership can be associated to the fact that the concept of leadership continues to be too entangled with that of the leader (or leaders, in the best case), rather than being viewed as the property of a social system. Again, traditional mental models of leadership continue to keep us from seeing other forms of leadership.

We are not suggesting that the knowledge principle of “relational dialogue” necessarily dominates the leadership practices of these contexts. It is likely that aspects of this type of leadership have emerged through negotiation and interaction as individuals bump into the limits of the first and second principles, and stumble into the possibilities offered by relational dialogue to produce the desired changes in the status quo. The extent to which these three principles coexist, and how dominant they are among communities engaged in

social change efforts is, in fact, an interesting empirical question. It is our task to explore it as the research partners of Leadership for a Changing World.

Some Implications for Research

If we view leadership as a social construct, as something that is relational, something that emerges out of a meaning making process in a particular context, then we must refocus our attention away from the individual leader and to the experience and work of leadership. To inquire into the nature of leadership and how it happens in a community requires a new approach to research, one that allows us to understand the particular knowledge principles a community uses as it engages in the work of leadership. The approach that we propose rests on three principles. First, we believe that a participatory approach in which we regard those engaged in the work of leadership as co-inquirers rather than subjects will allow for the richest understanding of experience. In a participatory approach, co-inquirers are involved in generating research questions, developing inquiry strategies, and providing direction to the research. Second, because context is a central concept in our understanding of leadership as a social construct, this participatory approach must be grounded in community. Third, a broad understanding of knowledge principles in a particular community will come from eliciting a range of perspectives within the community. We believe that a multi-modal approach to research, one that engages diverse methodologies, is best suited to this task.

Three examples of methodologies that are appropriate for implementing a multi-modal approach that is participatory and grounded in community are participatory ethnography, co-operative inquiry, and narrative inquiry. Ethnography, done with a participatory approach, offers an excellent opportunity for an in-depth look at leadership in a community over time. Co-operative inquiry is an action-oriented approach in which all involved are considered co-inquirers, serving as both co-researchers and co-subjects as they explore together issues of common interest in their practice. We view narrative inquiry as one of the most promising methodologies for understanding experience and the sense people make of their experience. Stories of leadership offer a window to how a

community approaches its leadership work and the meanings that people in the community attribute to that work.

What is particularly exciting about an approach to leadership research that is participatory, grounded in community, and multi-modal, is that it has the potential to bridge the gap between academics and practitioners. Not only does it promise to provide interesting new insights to enrich leadership theory, it allows for the opportunity to produce new knowledge that is useful to practitioners, thereby enhancing existing leadership and inspiring new leadership to emerge.

Conclusion

In sum, a social construction approach to studying leadership represents an excellent foundation from which to inquire about the extent to which, and the ways in which, leadership happens and helps to produce desired social change. Insights about the nature of leadership can be gained by directing attention to the shared understandings developed in communities of social change about their responsibilities and expectations for setting direction, affecting commitment and facing adaptive challenges. Is the responsibility for making these tasks happen assigned to an individual or shared by a group? Are these tasks concentrated or dispersed? How does each happen and how do people experience them? And more importantly, how does the community articulate their experience and understanding of leadership as a generative process? Asking the LCW participants to be our co-researchers in looking at the leadership experience of their community to answer these and other questions of their interest is a logical step, given that it is only through those involved in the meaning-making process that we can get at the essence of leadership.

The relational and constructionist approaches to leadership invite us to look anew at the focus and insights of existing empirical research and normative approaches to leadership. Attention to traits, behaviors, styles, processes, relationships, and activities, for example, can add to our understanding of how things happen when a group with a purpose tries to

achieve it. But these dimensions by themselves do not constitute the essence of leadership. Our approach suggests we are better off if we focus on the gestalt of the social relationships and the context within which leadership happens. This approach invites questions such as how people working together make leadership happen, what role individuals and groups play in bringing leadership into being, and how contexts affect the actual work of leadership in communities. To provide a compass to pursue this promising line of research, we have framed our guiding research question as follows: in what ways do communities trying to achieve social change engage in the work of leadership?

As we explore this question – and the many others that will emerge as the research unfolds for us and for our co-researchers, we may encounter traits, behaviors, relationships and activities. We may also find that in some groups the predominant knowledge principle around which the work of leadership unfolds is personal dominance, while in others it may be interpersonal influence or relational dialogue. We may find a combination of these models. But these differences and similarities are viewed within the broader relational context of shared understandings about how the group takes on the work. Our guiding question will help us explore what is common and what is unique to the different manifestations of leadership in the social change communities of our partners of inquiry. And we hope that it will change the conversation about leadership in this country as it offers new frames for new stories about the work of leadership.

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