

**Co-producing Knowledge:  
Practitioners and Scholars Working Together to Understand Leadership**

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## Introduction

The Ford Foundation, the Washington D.C. based Advocacy Institute and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University are partners in a new leadership awards program called *Leadership for a Changing World (LCW)*. The goal of this program is to recognize and better understand social change leadership in American communities. As the research and documentation team for the project, we are partnering with the program's awardees to generate new knowledge about the ways in which communities trying to make social change engage in the work of leadership. In doing this work, we have begun to explore and test a new approach to working with practitioners to co-produce knowledge about leadership.

Our LCW research agenda is rooted in our particular approach to understanding leadership and our commitment to generating practice-grounded research. We think of leadership as a process in which people come together to pursue change, and in doing so, collectively develop a shared vision of what the world (or some part or corner of it) should look like, making sense of their experience and shaping their decisions and actions. The role of articulating the vision may be taken on by one individual or by several. It may be rotated or shared. The emergence of leadership is therefore always a collective process of meaning-making.<sup>1</sup> This way of thinking about leadership grounds our research agenda.

The contextualized study of leadership – understood as meaning-making in a community of practice – demands a method of co-production of knowledge, a participatory approach in which all parties involved in the research process are considered co-researchers rather than some being objects of study. We believe that our particular approach to co-producing knowledge with practitioners offers promising opportunities for bridging the gap between theory and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> For further elaboration of these ideas refer to Drath, W. (2001). *The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc. and Drath, W. and Palus, C. (1994). *Making Common Sense: Leadership as Meaning Making in a Community of Practice*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

The purpose of this roundtable discussion was to use our experience with the LCW program to promote a conversation about the possibilities of practitioners and academics working together to co-produce relevant knowledge on leadership. The participants included both individuals involved in research on leadership and reflective practitioners interested in learning about research tools and methodologies they could use to enhance their practice. We began by opening up the conversation to participants' experiences and ideas about linking the work of practitioners and academics. Their experience then served as the basis for a discussion about the opportunities and dilemmas we have encountered in our work with the winners of the Leadership for a Changing World program. Participants gave their feedback on our thinking, sharing their experiences with similar collaborations where appropriate.

We had envisioned this roundtable as part of a larger discussion about research on leadership, one that was meant to engage both scholars and practitioners. Perhaps the most useful product of the discussion was an explicit surfacing of the many challenges that face both scholars and practitioners when they do attempt to partner. We close this paper with a discussion of those challenges.

### **The disconnect between theory and practice**

While there is an incredible amount of research on the topic of leadership and a multitude of people putting the work of leadership into practice, there continues to be a disconnect between these two worlds. Many practitioners seem dissatisfied with what the leadership literature has to offer them. Frequently, when scholars attempt to produce research that is relevant to practice, their work yields lists of *ways to be* as leaders rather than useful ways to understand and approach the work of leadership. Moreover, the leadership literature is, generally speaking, focused on narrow contexts and populations. The findings may not ring true for many people, especially women and minorities or others working in a community-based setting. In sum, the research methods that currently

dominate the field of leadership studies are not useful for solving the practical problems that practitioners face.<sup>2</sup>

Overcoming the current disconnect between theory and practice is critical for both scholars and practitioners. From a scholar's perspective, the link to practice is essential if one views leadership as a relational process. Simply observing the behavior of "leaders" will not yield useful knowledge about the work of leadership. Actually partnering with practitioners and entering the process they experience as leadership will prove much more fruitful. In fact, Rynes, Bartunek, and Daft find that "a preponderance of the evidence suggests that collaborations between researchers and practitioners increase research productivity and, in some cases, quality as well."<sup>3</sup> Practitioners also benefit from a closer partnership and stronger link between theory and practice. Most practitioners are reflective people who are interested in finding new ways of understanding leadership that are applicable to their own work.

Based on this disconnect, some advocate that scholars work more closely with practitioners. Rynes, Bartunek, and Daft write, "higher levels of direct contact with practitioners should improve the quality of academic research" (Rynes, Bartunek, and Daft, 2001, pp. 349). However, what we are proposing is very different and will contribute not only to the quality of academic research but also to practice. In our view, one of the most promising strategies for addressing the gap between theory and practice is co-production. Co-production refers to the joint inquiry work of practitioners and scholars, which requires the mutual acceptance of each other's points of reference and appreciation of what each party brings to the inquiry. Co-production builds on the expertise of both practitioners and scholars without privileging one set of experiences or skills over the other. One outcome of this kind of work is practice-grounded research, research that is based on data that comes directly from practice and yields findings that can inform practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Rynes, S., Bartunek, J., and Daft, R. (2001). Across the Great Divide: Knowledge Creation and Transfer Between Practitioners and Academics in Academy of Management Journal, Vol. 44, No. 2, 340-355.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 343.

There are certain preconditions to making co-production work. Specifically, scholars must make a commitment to doing research that is based on the needs of practitioners and that is organized to provide knowledge that is relevant to and informs practice. A second precondition for success is for practitioners to suspend any preconceptions about academic research they may have and trust that there is a way of doing research differently. They must also have faith in their own ability to do research. When these preconditions are in place, practitioners and scholars can come together to use new and creative methodologies to co-produce knowledge about leadership. Often times the first step of this co-production process is aimed at developing mutual trust as the foundation for a productive working partnership.

### **Our approach to co-production**

Currently, we are putting this notion of co-production to work through the Research and Documentation component of the Leadership for a Changing World Program (LCW). LCW gives an annual award to twenty individuals and groups who are members of communities advancing agendas of social change and enacting different forms of leadership. To develop the Research and Documentation component of this program, we invited the awardees to work with us as co-researchers to generate new knowledge about the theory and practice of leadership.

Several key assumptions are central to our approach to working with them. First, we believe that only by linking theory and practice can we develop new and more valid knowledge about leadership. Second, understanding how social change leadership processes work requires developing grounded accounts of the experience of those involved in the process. Next, using a multidisciplinary approach will help bring insights from disciplines ignored in traditional studies of leadership. Finally, incorporating perspectives and voices that have been traditionally ignored in mainstream study of leadership will produce new insights and more valid knowledge about it as a human experience.

Our design consists of three parallel streams of inquiry. These three streams are ethnographic inquiry, narrative inquiry and co-operative inquiry. Within the framework of this research design, LCW participants engage in individual and collective reflection. The research team consists of the LCW participants and a small group of outside initiating researchers working as co-production partners. Every team member participates as co-researcher in at least one research strategy over the course of his or her involvement in the program. This work is grounded in participants' experiences with social change leadership.

***The contribution of ethnographic inquiry*** – For LCW we use a particular kind of ethnography that is both collaborative and community-based. This means that the individual ethnographer or team facilitates and supports an ethnographic inquiry process that is driven by the community members. The goals of the ethnography are to produce new knowledge about the ways in which communities engage in the work of leadership and to draw out lessons that are useful to the community involved in the study. This research stream offers a window to the experience of leadership from the inside out, over time and in context. It generates narratives characterized by “thick descriptions” that result in rich portraits of the relationships, practices and processes within which communities engage in the work of leadership.

Local ethnographers are conducting four ethnographic studies of LCW awardee communities. As with the other streams, awardees are invited to be co-researchers in ethnography. Each ethnographer conducts three months of fieldwork, spending a significant amount of time, with several periods of continuous presence, in the awardees community.

***The contribution of narrative inquiry*** – We offer multiple opportunities and methods for awardees to tell their stories. The main approach consists of in-depth group conversations with the awardees and others in their community. These conversations will be the primary source for constructing leadership narratives over the program cycle. Before the first conversation, we have a telephone call with each awardee to determine the direction

they would like their narrative to take. In this way, the awardees are involved in the research design process from the beginning.

We use a fluid and open interpretive interview technique to allow the story line to take any direction, as each participant's experience of the work of leadership is captured ("tell me about your work"... "you've talked about X, tell me more about it"...). Taking advantage of the developmental potential of this stream of research, follow up conversations – toward the end of the cycle – start with an invitation to reflect upon the narrative generated from the previous conversations. Our hope is that these iterative conversations will enhance participants' skills as 'reflective practitioners' and enrich the narratives with new learning.

At the end of the program cycle, we will have twenty stories that tell of the ways in which the awardees and their communities make sense of the experience with leadership, thus providing ample information about various dimensions of the work of leadership. These stories will each contain some written narrative and may draw on other media when appropriate. We will also generate thematic propositions on the work of leadership by looking for common themes and patterns across stories.

***The contribution of co-operative inquiry*** – We invited LCW participants to join one or two inquiry groups of eight to ten members each that focus on a leadership inquiry topic of their choosing. About five meetings over the course of the cycle will produce the iterative "action-reflection-action" sequence typical of the co-operative inquiry tradition. In this tradition group members collect "data" from their practice and their community to generate practitioner-based knowledge in the inquiry meetings.

There is no predominant voice in the product of this stream, as all group participants, including members of the core research team, co-produce knowledge together, and document the learning process and the collective answers to the explored leadership questions.

The goal of the Research and Documentation component of LCW is to generate new knowledge to help change the conversation about leadership in this country. Yet the strength of the proposed design has ripple effects that yield additional contributions. Two of these are worth mentioning. One involves demonstrating the power of an innovative approach to leadership development based on the democratization of research as a tool for individual growth and for community capacity building. The other involves challenging the scholarly community to consider the potential benefits of producing more creative and still credible, social science based, empirical research on leadership. We are committed to pursuing both.<sup>4</sup>

### **The challenges of implementation**

While co-production is an exciting and promising approach to bridging the gap between theory and practice, it comes with certain challenges. The first major challenge for both practitioners and scholars is to build enough trust that they can work together as partners. The pervasive nature of the gap between theory and practice, the radically different experiences of practitioners and scholars and even divergent worldviews can make trust building difficult. Overcoming the distrust that may be an obstacle to a positive working relationship between scholars and academics means putting in place those preconditions we mentioned earlier. Scholars must be committed to doing research that is relevant and useful to practitioners, and practitioners must suspend their preconceptions about academic research.

A second challenge is that practitioners are busy people who are deeply committed to their work and who may have little time or energy for research. We encountered this challenge when we began our work with the LCW awardees. While they had enthusiasm for reflection and learning, the research and documentation component of the program

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<sup>4</sup> For more on our approach to the Research and Documentation component of Leadership for a Changing World and our thinking about leadership refer to Ospina, S. and Schall, E. (2000). [Perspectives on Leadership: Our Approach to Research and Documentation for the LCW Program.](#) <http://leadershipforchange.org/research/papers/perspectives.php3>. Ospina, S. and Schall, E. (2001). [Design for the Research & Documentation Component.](#)



was not their first priority. A deeply embedded and compounding problem is the myth that research is something that experts do. This is exactly the notion that co-production works to dispel, but it can make co-production a challenging endeavor. Scholars must work hard to convince practitioners that the kind of research they want to do is based on appreciating the expertise that practitioners bring to the inquiry. Another challenge is that co-production is more time-consuming and ambitious than some more traditional forms of research. There are more and more diverse agendas involved, and more people participate on a deeper level.

Finally, scholars face the challenge of balancing preparedness with a necessary flexibility about design issues. If scholars approach practitioners to engage them in a process of co-production without any sense of a plan, the practitioners may feel like they are wasting their time. On the other hand, if a rigid research design is imposed on the practitioners, scholars are not being genuine in their attempt to do co-production. Striking this important balance may be a new consideration for scholars who are used to doing more traditional forms of research in which they have sole responsibility for developing the research design and protocols.

Participants at the roundtable discussion offered further ideas about the challenges that practitioners encounter when they try to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Two comments were particularly insightful. First, one participant asked how one pitches the idea of co-production or of any collaborative inquiry so that it is of interest to both practitioners and scholars. Often, practitioners and scholars speak different languages, which makes clear and persuasive communication difficult and can feed the distrust we mentioned earlier. A second challenge offered by a participant at the roundtable was that access to scholars is limited. Practitioners frequently have no connections to scholars and may not know how to initiate a co-production project. Most commonly, it is a scholar who initiates this kind of work. Certainly, in the case of LCW, we have been responsible for initiating the relationship and the work.

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<http://leadershipforchange.org/research/papers/design.php3>. Ospina, S. and Schall, E. (2001). Leadership (Re)constructed: How Lens Matters.

Beyond these challenges, though, one practitioner participant at the roundtable raised an important reason why practitioners might be interested in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Specifically, people whose work aims to put issues on the public agenda need the work of scholars to lend a certain legitimacy to their arguments. To make this kind of research even more useful, practitioners would need to take a role in defining its requirements.

While the participants of the roundtable found it productive to surface these important challenges to the work of co-production, we do not yet have solutions formulated. A helpful next step would be to begin to build some practical theories about how to implement co-production as an approach to learning about leadership and bridging the gap between theory and practice. We hope that our experience with Leadership for a Changing World over the next five years will provide us with significant insight into this very issue.