The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership

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8. A constructionist lens on leadership: charting new territory

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The April, 2003 meeting of the general theory scholars included invitations to scholars utilizing action-research methodologies as well as to practitioners on the frontline of leadership development in communities. Scholars like John L. Johnson, Professor Emeritus, University of the District of Columbia; Deborah Meehan, Executive Director of the Leadership Learning Community; and Sonia Ospina, faculty of NYU's Wagner School, joined the group for a robust discussion.

Ospina discussed the participant-centered research she and her colleagues are undertaking for the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World program and shared with the other scholars some findings emerging from this approach. [2] Using a constructionist lens, Ospina and her colleagues are working with social change leaders to understand how leadership emerges and develops in community-based organizations engaged in social change agendas.

A constructionist lens suggests that leadership happens when a community develops and uses, over time, shared agreements to create results that have collective value. Grounded in culture and embedded in social structures such as power and stratification, these agreements influence and give meaning to members' actions, interactions and relationships, and help people mobilize to make change happen. Among the agreements that help to illuminate the nature of social change leadership in the studied communities, Ospina and her colleagues have identified a worldview composed of implicit assumptions about the nature of knowledge, change, humans and the world; articulated formulations of the expected outcomes of change, mediated through levers of personal and organizational power; and a set of ethical references or core values of social justice that help anchor decisions and actions. From these agreements, in turn, emerge authentic practices that coincide with the group's worldview, visions of the future and values (Ospina et al., 2005).

This chapter addresses the constructionist view in leadership studies and touches on some promising interpretative approaches, notably narrative inquiry and cooperative inquiry. All of these approaches rest on the assumption that leadership is intrinsically relational and social in nature, is the result of shared

meaning-making, and is rooted in context or place. Leadership from this perspective is not only necessary and possible, to re-state the Mount Hope challenge put to the scholars, but ubiquitous and emergent.

CONSTRUCTIONISM, REALITY AND KNOWLEDGE

As Gill Hickman and Dick Couto discuss in Chapter 7, there are two existential stances taken in leadership research. Essentialists maintain that reality (social and natural) exists apart from our perceptions of that reality and that individuals *perceive* the world rather than construct it (Rosenblum and Travis, 2003, p. 33). Conversely, constructionists believe that humans *construct* reality and give it meaning through their social, political, legal and other interactions (Crotty, 1998).

The emergence of constructionism was rooted in the early work of 19th-century scholars as distinct as Karl Mannheim, George Herbert Mead, and Karl Marx. It is embedded in important intellectual movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as pragmatism, existential phenomenology, critical theory, and later the postmodernist movement, especially in the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Kenneth Gergen. Empirical work has been undertaken in the fields of sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckman, 1966), sociology of science and technology (Grint, 2004), and the history of science (Sorenson, 1992).

Constructionism 'is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).[3] A constructionist lens suggests that meaning is not discovered in the world, but constructed from it. Furthermore, meaning is not created in the mind, but it is constructed from the world and its objects. In other words, meaning results when human beings engage in the world that they experience and interpret (a world that also includes other human beings).

Constructionists bring together the ideas of an 'objective' reality and a 'subjective' interpretation of it into a single perspective. It suggests that meaning (and therefore understanding, knowledge and truth) results from the interplay of object and subject, that is, of humans engaging with the world. Crotty illustrates this defining feature of a constructionist lens as follows: 'The chair may exist as a phenomenal object regardless of whether any consciousness is aware of its existence. It exists *as a chair*, however, only if conscious beings construe it as a chair. As a chair, it too is constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life' (Crotty, 1998, p. 55). The generation of meaning is always a social, rather than an individual process, because to engage in

meaning-making human beings draw from existing previous meanings in their culture, and the latter, in turn, is embedded in historically grounded social structures.

A CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW OF LEADERSHIP

A constructionist view presumes that our understanding of leadership is socially constructed over time, as individuals interact with one another, rather than being something embodied in individuals or possessed by them. It is relatively recently that leadership scholars have employed various constructionist ideas in their search for leadership constructs which transcend individual leader qualities or traits. Yet the idea that leadership is relational – or as Sorenson says 'emerging in the space between' people rather than 'in' a person – has been percolating over the last 30 years in the leadership and organizational literatures. This perspective has gained currency over the years as trait-based, leader-focused research has given way to more group-oriented perspectives such as described in the preceding chapter.

Organizational scholars like Pfeffer (1977), Smircich and Morgan (1982), Smircich (1983), Tierney (1987) and Tierney and Lincoln (1997) pursued the idea that leadership emerges from the constructions and actions of people in organizations. More than two decades ago, Smircich and Morgan posed an invitation to look deeper into the leadership phenomenon and to 'focus on the way meaning in organized settings is created, sustained, and changed [to] provide a powerful means of understanding the fundamental nature of leadership as a social process' (Smirchich and Morgan, 1982, p. 261). Only recently have scholars started to take this invitation seriously in developing an explicit constructionist perspective of leadership.

According to a constructionist view, 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 et al., 1985; Meindl, 1995; Drath, 2001).

Recent approaches move the study of leadership away from person-centered leadership into a more complex role analysis. While this shift has moved the literature closer to a more subtle understanding of leadership, constructionists would claim that the leadership of a group is more nuanced and interpenetrating. They pose that 'the leader', while relevant to action, represents a different phenomenon than that of 'leadership', and that each demands to be treated distinctly. This shifts the attention from individual persons to communities of practice

(Drath and Palus, 1994; Drath, 2001). Ospina and Schall (2001, p. 4) writing in an earlier article describe this challenge:

> It [constructionism] 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.

Thus scholars using a constructionist lens see leadership as a group-wide process and despite only rudimentary tools at their disposable to discern it, they are clear on their objectives: to allow exploration in 'the ways people understand and attribute leadership and also ... [to] distinguish between the emergence of leadership as a collective process and the practices designated leaders engage in' (Ospina and Schall, 2000, p. 1). Constructionism examines leadership as a *process* of meaning-making: it investigates the unfolding of leadership over time, rather than a snapshot of a particular moment, such as ones utilized in critical incidents or case studies. In short, constructionism views leadership as a dynamic and on-going undertaking. The following sections develop a constructionist view of leadership by exploring its relational, systemic, emergent and contextual dimensions.

The Relational and Systemic Dimensions of Leadership

First and foremost, constructionists claim that leadership is relational. This, of course, is not a new thought. The relational view of leadership is present, implicitly or explicitly, in some of the most insightful contemporary work on leadership. For example, Burns's seminal work starts with the premise that leadership, like power, is 'relational, collective and purposeful' (Burns, 1978, p. 18). Burns's view is that leaders convert followers to leaders and in some cases followers convert leaders to moral leaders. In his later work, *Transforming Leadership: The Pursuit of Happiness* (Burns, 2003) Burns explores how people, rather than leaders and followers per se, create environments conducive to social change.

Other contemporary work on leadership calls attention to the shared and distributed nature of leadership, as evidenced by the increasing importance given in the leadership literature to concepts like dialogue, collaboration, and collective, shared and dispersed leadership (Crosby, 1999; Gronn, 1999; Goldman and Kahnweiler, 2000; Hesselbein et al., 1999; and Lipman-Blumen, 1996). For example, by focusing on leadership as activities that stem from a collective challenge, Heifetz's work (1994) directs attention away from an exclusive focus on the 'leader' to consider the acts of leadership, leadership in process, and the

public aspects of leadership work, all elements that point to the importance of relationship.

Others have explored particular forms of leadership that are based on the sharing of authority relations. For example, 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.

To some degree, however, even the most sophisticated thinking about leadership still vests the 'power' in individuals. Constructionists are attempting to change the lens. 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' (Lambert et al., 1995, p. 32). They continue, '[s]ince leadership represents a possible set of actions for everyone in the community, anyone can choose to lead' (Lambert et al., 1995, p. 50). In this definition, the leader *qua* leader is replaced by a community whose individual members have the potential to engage in leadership acts (not roles). While not empirically based, Lambert's approach to leadership highlights the importance of community, reciprocity and purpose for understanding leadership, making more explicit its social and relational aspects, while eliminating almost entirely the figure of the leader.

Juan-Carlos Pastor takes these ideas a step further in suggesting that leadership is 'a collective social consciousness that emerges in the organization' as individuals interact with one another (Pastor, 1998, p. 5). 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, or a quality located in a single individual, 'the leader'.

Sorenson and Hickman's work on invisible leadership (Sorenson and Hickman, 2002) fits nicely within these novel discussions. They argue that much leadership is invisible because it transpires in the 'space between' people. They compare this form of leadership to Thelonious Monk's masterly use of 'blue notes' in music. Blue notes comprise the music that takes place in the 'space' between notes. Jazz critics attribute the genius of Monk's remarkable music to the nuance, phrasing and rhythm of the spaces between the formal notes. That space of course, is completely invisible. But it is the relationship between notes that makes them powerful, not the notes themselves. If we extend this analogy to leadership, invisible leadership takes place in the space between people, in everyday life and in extraordinary circumstances.

Applications of other theoretical perspectives such as critical interpretivism, critical theory and feminism link more explicitly this relational, systemic view – and its cognitive orientation – to an outside material world, by connecting the systems of interdependency to historically grounded structures of power (Ospina et al., 2005). This more grounded constructionist approach emphasizes culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of leadership in context, in contrast to universal traits, fixed contingent styles, or disembodied cognitive structures. This approach also challenges the dynamics of exclusion that have incorporated very few voices in the mainstream narratives of leadership, and uses conceptual tools to understand the structural dynamics of exclusion that characterize social relationships. Finally, this approach tries to 'fill the gaps' (Crotty, 1998) in traditional narratives of leadership because of the dominance of a masculine, and thus partial, perspective in the construction of earlier leadership theories.

To sum up, from a constructionist view, leadership is relational and systemic. It emerges and manifests itself through relations and in relationships, and it cannot exist outside of these relations. These relationships, in turn, are grounded in wider systems of interdependence and constrained by social structure.

The Emergent Dimension of Leadership: Meaning-Making in Communities of Practice

A second important dimension of constructionism is the notion that reality is a shared construction and that the process of making sense and ascribing meaning to events is central to human life. Constructionists recognize that people collectively construct our world and give it meaning. They would argue that even the most basic human concepts such as 'death' (Grint, 2004), 'love' and 'work' are culturally and historically bound. So, too, is 'leadership'. Constructionism asserts that leadership is essentially about making-meaning in communities of practice (Drath, 2001; Drath and Palus, 2004), and is thus an emergent reality.

But all meaning-making does not produce leadership. Leadership is a unique type of meaning-making process compared with more general cognitive processes that are part of human life. This is so because the shared agreements that produce leadership are articulated and generated within a community of practice, that is, a group working to achieve results. These agreements are purposive and 'other regarding'. They connect wills and help transform wills into action.

The potential for leadership exists when there is a collective need to accomplish something, that is, a need for purposive action that involves change. Any group who shares that need faces a set of demands to attain it. Parsons et al. (1953) described the four functional prerequisites of organizing that all groups coping with any material problem face: setting direction, actualizing the goals

of the enterprise, sustaining the commitment of the group, and creating adaptive mechanisms to re-create the process as needed. If a group does not respond to these demands, it will not survive to serve its purpose. When the individuals in the group are willing and are able to address these demands, leadership happens.

As Wilfred Drath (2001) puts it in *The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership*, these demands call for leadership and thus leadership can be viewed as the result of the group's efforts to address them successfully.[4] He states that leadership happens when members of a community create a shared understanding of the moral obligations each has with the others to make sure that these demands are taken care of, so that the common cause is realized. The work of leadership is the work the community achieves together in setting direction, creating and maintaining commitment and facing adaptive challenges. In this sense, 'leadership is people making sense of events and circumstances within a community, as the community invents and pursues its activities' (Palus and Horth, 1996, p. 54). Rather than a fixed phenomenon or a set of qualities that belong to an individual, as meaning-making, leadership is an emergent phenomenon that develops in community, over time.[5]

An example illustrates this view. Even in our own GTOL group, most of the members would agree that the leadership of the GTOL group was an emerging phenomenon, rather than a person-centered activity. While three of us initially presented the idea of a quest for a general theory, others emerged who took on critical aspects of the functioning and production of the group's efforts. Certain aspects of the intellectual work of the group were managed by various theorists at different times.

The GTOL-group-as-a-whole examined theories but also processes to some degree: seniority, discipline, voice, and place were all taken up, often more than once. Sometimes the work was in the context of the group-as-a-whole, and other times it was taken up between individuals. While a core group of people stuck with the process over three years (and there was substantial debate about the use of 'core'), the group tolerated a few newcomers and visitors as well as venturing out into the International Leadership Association and the Leadership Learning Community gatherings, with varying degrees of comfort.

In the end the group settled on two complementary approaches addressed by Wren at the start of the book: We would tell the narrative of our quest rather than attempt to come to a conclusion about our search for a general theory and we would allow leadership in our own group to emerge in our 'as if' group. For a group of independent leadership scholars intent on finding a general theory as well as retaining our intellectual independence, that in itself was an accomplishment.

The Importance of Context

The meaning-making processes that help construct leadership and the attributions of leadership made in particular settings do not just occur in people's minds, nor are they disembodied from material environments. These processes are always social, rooted in social interaction, and therefore sensitive to identifiable contingencies associated with the material aspects of these settings. How communities agree to undertake the demands of direction, commitment and adaptation to realize their common cause, is context specific.

For example, the degree of complexity of the system affects how a community agrees to address the tasks that call forth leadership. Over time, as happens with all collective sense-making, some taken-for-granted sets of ideas and rules about how to best deal with these demands have become articulated as leadership formulas, or shared understandings of leadership; what Drath (2001) calls 'knowledge principles'. These core sets of ideas become 'short-cuts' that other people use to address the demands of collective work. With increased complexity, simpler tools of sense-making for action have hit a limit of usefulness, and new formulas have become more acceptable. Even though people are not born with these principles in their minds, they can easily absorb them through culture and use them as needed in their particular contexts. One way to understand leadership in a community is to uncover the underlying dominant knowledge principle that its members are using to make sense of their work.

Drath argues that Western society has favored three knowledge principles of leadership which have emerged over time, as social systems have become increasingly more complex: personal dominance, interpersonal influence and relational dialogue. Sometimes these are combined, because the formulas that help solve more complex challenges incorporate elements of those used to address simpler ones.

Leadership as personal dominance is a knowledge principle in which a dominant figure – the person of a leader – is the source of leadership. This formula has worked best in simple systems. More complex systems may rely on the knowledge principle of interpersonal influence, a formula where the source of leadership shifts from a single individual to the roles of actors in negotiation and competition to influence each other. Finally, in the knowledge principle of leadership as relational dialogue, the source of leadership is not a person or a role, but a system, as leadership emerges by way of dialogue and collaborative learning to achieve a shared sense of the demands of collective work.

An effective way to understand how these principles work and how leadership happens is 'by entering into the community and inquiring into the shared meaning-making languages and processes of the community' (Drath, 2001, p. 49). In other words, leadership can only be understood in context and by way of un-

derstanding how people make sense of it as they tackle the challenges of collective work.

Finally, the claims that leadership is relational and systemic, emergent and contextual, and that it is socially constructed, do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that it always takes a collective form; nor does it mean that it is by nature democratic. Formal and informal leadership takes many forms, depending on the attributions those in relation make about each other in concrete historical and organizational contexts. Emerging from collective processes that support it, visible leadership can manifest in strong charismatic individuals; or in dyads, as in the case of co-directorships; or in groups as in the case of committees with authority to make decisions; or in organizations with very flat and democratic structures where leadership is collective. Similarly, the tasks that call forth leadership can be, in fact, distributed so that different individuals take up different roles and leadership emerges in many places within a given system or is rotated over time. Furthermore, while all individuals in a given system have the capacity to exercise leadership, and not all do, those that do may choose to enact their choice in ways that evidence any style from democratic to autocratic. What form leadership takes, and how individuals exercise leadership are, in fact, questions that must be answered empirically, by looking at leadership and its manifestations in the real world.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

To explore, with a constructionist lens, the nature of leadership and how it happens in a community, requires a new approach to research, with implications for how the research agenda is conceptualized, designed and implemented (Ospina, 2003). A constructionist approach sensitizes researchers to the dangers of confusing leadership with the person who is identified as the leader (Rost, 1993; Vanderslice, 1988). It also 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.

A new approach is grounded in at least four premises. First, viewing leadership as a social construct and as something that is relational, emergent and contextual suggests a research agenda that shifts attention away from the individual leader and toward the work of leadership; from leadership qualities to collective agreements and the actions that embody them; and from behaviors to practices and experiences. Second, a constructionist view poses that a participatory approach (involving those engaged in the work of leadership as co-inquirers rather than subjects) will yield deeper understanding of the experience of leadership as meaning-making for action. Third, because context is central, this perspective suggests that a participatory approach must be grounded in com-

munity. Fourth, from this view, understanding the way leadership emerges in a particular community requires eliciting a range of perspectives within the community. Hence a multi-modal approach to research, one that engages diverse methodologies, is best suited to this task.

Researchers using a constructionist lens will pay attention to the nature of the challenges and questions that the community faces as its members try to achieve change, and the ways people make sense of these challenges. Research embedded in context – in community – would explore questions such as: How does a community clarify what matters most? What stakeholders participate in this clarification process? What difficulties do they experience when facing the demands of organizing and collective work? These questions may require identifying the extent to which the roles of leadership concentrate on a single person, but this 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 community strategy, how and why does this happen?

Appropriate methodologies for implementing a participatory multi-modal approach that is grounded in community include, among many possibilities, narrative inquiry, participatory ethnography and cooperative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a promising methodology for understanding experience and the sense people make of it because of the power of stories as a sense-making tool (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy, 2005). Ethnography, done with a participatory approach, offers an excellent opportunity for an in-depth look at leadership in a community over time. Cooperative inquiry is an action-oriented approach in which all involved act as both co-researchers and co-subjects that inquire together into burning issues of their practice, thus exploring the experience of leadership from the inside out.

The process of a cooperative inquiry (CI) offers great potential to explore leadership as a relational, emergent and contextual reality. CI itself as a methodology is also relational, emergent and grounded in the context of its participants' practice (Heron and Reason, 2001), as illustrated by the four stages that characterize it:

Stage I. Examining areas for inquiry, identifying initial research questions and propositions to test through action

Stage II. Initiating the agreed actions and observing and recording the outcomes of their own and each other's behavior

Stage III. Bracketing off prior beliefs and preconceptions and intending to see experience in a fresh way

Stage IV. Returning to consider original theories in light of experience, modifying, reformulating, and rejecting them, or adopting new propositions to be tested again in the next cycle of action

Lastly, a constructionist approach to research demands a broadening of the scope when determining *where* to study leadership. Scholars have too often looked for leadership only in the expected places, often in hierarchical organizations or systems. Indeed, we may be 'looking for leadership in all the wrong places' (Allen, 1990, p. 8). Kathy Allen (1990) identifies three assumptions underlying the most typical sampling techniques in leadership research: 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 our ability to find leadership because it reduces the pool from which to sample. Allen argues for the need to 'look where we have not looked before' (Allen, 1990, p. 8) to better understand leadership and to expand our present knowledge of it. We would add that as scholars we should not only look at different kinds of people, but most importantly, look at different kinds of contexts, as well as pay greater attention to the nature and content of work in these contexts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The currency gained by the application of constructionist ideas to leadership has implications for practice, as has been documented by action-oriented scholars. Indeed, with the shift in understanding of organizations as rational machines to one of organizations as living organisms, new ideas of leadership effectiveness have started to shift from the mental model of the heroic leader to that of post-heroic leadership, characterized by 'leadership practices embedded within a network of interdependencies at different levels within the organization' (Fletcher, 2002).

This perspective emphasizes relational processes that depend on social networks of influence, so that leadership is enacted at all levels of the network. The 'visible' leaders represent only the tip of an iceberg (McIntosh, 1989, cited in Fletcher, 2002), or the white caps in the ocean (Drath, 2001), but they are supported by many other people, practices and processes that make things happen. These underlying leadership dynamics support visible leaders in the same way that the underlying piece of the iceberg supports and balances its tip, or in the same way that the deep blue sea produces its sea caps (Fletcher, 2002, p. 3).

Action-oriented leadership scholars propose to translate these ideas into leadership practices that are more in accordance with the demands of contem-

porary organizations. This proposal approximates Drath's notion of relational dialogue as the most appropriate knowledge principle or leadership formula to cope with the challenges of complex systems. For example, 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, so that the interdependencies of the environment are addressed. While these scholars do not consider themselves constructionists, their work is premised on assumptions such as the relational, emergent and contextual nature of leadership.

Some scholars propose fully developed programs that are directly consistent with a constructionist lens on leadership. For example, focusing on the agenda of social change for global transformation, Kaczmarski and Cooperrider (1997) argue that the cooperative work required today demands a type of leadership that helps bridge diverse knowledge systems, that is, cultures of inquiry, which 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' (Kaczmarski and Cooperrider, 1997, p. 251). This type of leadership, they argue, is required in contexts where diverse perspectives and truths co-exist and where the complexities of organizing are extreme.

In the context of the USA, Raelin (2003) proposes a new type of leadership practice for contemporary organizations, where the collective demands for direction, actualization, commitment and adaptation are distributed across all organizational members. The result, he says, would be a system full of leadership, or a *leaderful organization*. Leaderful practices, Raelin argues, are based on an understanding of leadership that shifts from the traditional notions that leadership is serial (one leader at a time), individual, controlling and dispassionate, to the notions of leadership as concurrent, collective, collaborative and compassionate.

To make the shift toward a leaderful organization, Raelin argues, one must believe that more than one person can offer their leadership to a community at the same time, from their position, without taking away the leadership of others (concurrent). From this it follows that mobilization of action or decision-making emerges from multiple members as needed (collective). The shift also requires believing that all group members represent the community and control it by way of dialogue around differences (collaborative). Finally, the shift is based on the value of respect for the worth of each member (compassionate). Leadership practices derived from these ideas provide normative guidance to develop more democratic and participatory approaches to organizing.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

As scholars and practioners involved in understanding leadership, we carry assumptions about the concept and practice of leadership that are consistent with the underlying assumptions of the culture within which it is embedded. Peter Senge refers to these assumptions as 'mental models' – similar to Sorenson's 'cognitive structures' – described as 'deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action' (Senge, 1990, p. 8).

Contemporary dominant mental models of leadership are shifting gradually, but most people still carry (and use in practice) a perspective of leadership as personal dominance and interpersonal influence, to use Drath's knowledge principles as reference. These mental models of leadership offer only a narrow understanding of how leadership works. Therefore, these models keep us from recognizing the multiple sources of leadership, the multiple forms leadership may take, and the multiple places where it can be found. Sorenson (1992) and Ospina and Schall (2000, p. 2) describe what they see as a dominant leadership model in the USA, as shaped by narratives about individuals, generally men, and all too often white men. They 'offer incomplete understandings of how leadership works because they rely on a "heroic" version compiled from a narrow set of voices' (Ospina and Schall, 2000, p. 2). They further claim that the dominant mental model has 'kept the public from recognizing alternative models of leadership and the extent to which they are developing in communities' (Ospina and Schall, 2000, p. 2). Sorenson writes of the personal cost of the heroic myth, 'involving tremendous personal sacrifice and struggle' (Sorenson, 1992, p. 328).

The use of mental models both facilitates and inhibits our understanding of leadership. Telling the leadership story (or naming it) as dominance or influence may serve a social function in our collective minds by allowing people to attribute actions with personal qualities a critical role in explaining existential dilemmas and anxieties of the times. In this sense 'leadership', as Hunt suggests (Hunt, 1984, pp. 159–78), could be thought of as a cognitive tool that helps people make sense of events that otherwise would be linked to social forces too intangible and removed to be controlled. Heroic leadership may be a collective way to constructively cope with uncertainty. At the same time, there is also a danger that scholars and practitioners may be inhibited by these agreed-upon mental models of leadership.

The constructionist approach to understanding leadership invites 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. The construc-

tionist approach views the gestalt of the social relationships, the meaning constructed in the process, 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.

Narrativist Wallace Martin suggests that 'by changing the definition of what is being studied, we change what we see; and when different definitions are used to chart the same territory, the results will differ, as do topographical, political and demographic maps, each revealing one aspect of reality by virtue of disregarding all others' (cited by Barry and Elmers, 1997). A constructionist lens on leadership offers precisely this: An opportunity to look at the same territory of leadership that we all share by virtue of our membership in contemporary society, in a way that will help reveal aspects of leadership that we have missed before.

NOTES

1. The authors want to acknowledge the earlier work Ospina coauthored with Ellen Schall (2000, 2001) where several ideas developed in this chapter were first proposed and refined.
2. See the 'Research' link on the program's website: www.leadershipforchange.org.
3. Crotty's important distinction between *constructivism*, which focuses on the meaning-making process of individuals and *constructionism*, which focuses on the collective generation and transmission of meaning has implications for understanding leadership through a constructionist lens, because it renders meaning-making as collective rather than individual.
4. Drath summarizes the demands that trigger a call for leadership in a group in three rather than four tasks: direction, commitment and adaptation – and defines the latter in Heifetz's terms.
5. This perspective is consistent with the new understandings of complexity theory, a branch of chaos theory that gives primacy to the idea of emergent, fluid social orders developing out of chaos (Marion, 1999).

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