

Developing Adaptive Leadership

Final Paper

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Leadership

What leadership really is? Can it be developed? How?

Polysemy is a quality held by the word leadership. It is used in many contexts and with so many meanings that sometimes it is hard to understand what people really think about this concept.

It does not matter if you are in a business environment, within an NGO or working for the government; if you are in the military, in the school or in the church; if you need to have an impact in your sport team, in your family or in your community service project.

Leadership is diffuse and seems to serve for everything. *Leadership* seems to be always needed, and that is one reason of its attractiveness. This idea of a *hero leader* that solves everything is embedded in a particular way of making meaning of the world.

Many courses and programs in different schools or educational places target adults using the *L-word* in their titles. As thrilling labels they propose leadership as a magic word to gain anything you want –the *abracadabra* for any door. They promise the development of leadership in many ways and guarantee its success if you enroll. They are also making

meaning of the world expecting external figures of authority to solve the difficult problems that torn them. This way of understanding leadership is very helpful for many situations, but the increasing complexity of current life is showing the flaws of this system, and it is demanding a more comprehensive way of understanding leadership and its challenges.

So what leadership really is? Can it be developed? And how?

In order to approach these questions I will discuss a particular course that intent to make progress in these questions. Every fall at the Kennedy School of Government, Prof. Ronald A. Heifetz teaches *'Exercising Leadership: Mobilizing Group Resources'*¹. Through this paper I will try to answer how much does Heifetz's course helps to develop leadership capacity.

Development and Leadership

But what is development? And, can it be relevant to leadership?

Many theories address the process of development. I will use the constructive-developmental theory developed by Robert Kegan (1982). His theory combines constructivist and developmental aspects. The former brings how people make meaning while the latter contributes showing "how persons or systems evolve through eras according to regular principles of stability and change" (Kegan, Robert; 1982; p. 8).

¹ Excerpts from the syllabus can be found in Appendix 1.

Thus, Kegan's constructive-developmental theory implicates the process of how people enlarge their ways of constructing meaning, moving from positions of being subject of a particular order of consciousness to the position of holding that order as an object.

In sum, can Heifetz's teaching methods foster leadership capacity? To answer these questions I will first present Heifetz's definition for leadership and discuss its relation to development ingredients of challenge and support. Secondly, I will present the different and innovative teaching methods used in *'Exercising Leadership: Mobilizing Group Resources'* and discuss their impact on development from the perspective of Kegan's constructive-developmental theory. Finally, I will conclude with some habits that can function as the way of sustaining the development over time.

Holding Environment for Leadership:

How to simultaneously challenge and support?

During his work, Kegan identified five different orders of consciousness (1994). These orders function as whole systems that people use to construct meaning while facing their life's demands. Each of these systems fits to some tasks while fail in others. Development involves the process of moving from one order to the next, covering demands of increasing complexity. Leadership is an activity that can grow its degree of holding variables while the person is evolving through these orders of consciousness. This process of developing the way of making meaning will allow tackling those demands of increasing complexity, usual in our days.

Older adolescents and the majority of adults are at the third order of consciousness –or ‘socialized mind’ (Garvey Berger, Jennifer; 1999). These are the vast population that enrolls in leadership programs and courses. At third order, people subject their sense of authorization to external sources (Kegan, 1982). This way of authorizing their own acts *has* them. In relation to leadership, the person at the third order will expect solutions from the figure of authority. When occupying positions of authority, they will rely in a theory of behaving not yet able to be faced as an object. This external authoritative theory will function as the conscious mirror to their acts and decisions. The third order of mind can resolve leadership demands within “traditional societies” (Kegan, 1982), which Heifetz (1994) called *technical problems* to differentiates them from *adaptive challenges*. The difficulty arises when the person from the third order faces the demands within a “modern society” (Kegan, 1982), where the *adaptive challenges* will require a mind from the fourth order –the self-authoring mind.

Some variables that conform the Heifetz’s course class includes people with a wide variety of ages, religions, work experience, gender; coming from many different places and programs; that meet during three months, twice a week for the big class and once for their group consultation reunion. The variety and diversity of background and the size of the class, the frequency of meeting and duration are elements that characterized this course. These variables create an environment that will generate a ‘modern society’ demands.

It is not the aim of this paper to analyze the vast meaning of leadership itself. As a way of narrowing the scope of this work, I will focus only on some aspects of Heifetz's definition, using the image that describes leadership as an activity of "mobilizing people to tackle tough problems" (Heifetz, Ronald A.; 1994; p. 15). In other words, mobilizing a group of people to face its "adaptive challenge –the gap between aspirations and reality" (p. 99).

From a developmental perspective, Heifetz's definition of leadership includes challenge and support –the "two necessary ingredients for development" (Garvey Berger, Jennifer; 1999; p. 12). In one hand, the adaptive work that the group is facing functions as the *challenge*. In the other hand, the ability to mobilize people to tackle those challenges will require a particular way of *support* to prevent work avoidance. From a constructivist-developmental perspective, in order to make some progress, the act of facing the adaptive work will require an evolution in the way people are actually making meaning of the challenge.

First Words.

At the beginning of the course, the professor starts with an easy question: '*How many of you had been in position of authority facing a situation with a new group of people?*' An important amount of hands are raised as a response. So he poses a challenging question: '*Well, I'm in that same position now; what do you suggest me to do?*' and remain in silence while students began to talk with a certain level of tension. This original behavior

represents something new for the audience of students. It is a challenge for those in their ‘socialized’ order of mind. They are expecting the professor to direct the class and will test him using the ‘theory’ that *has* them. They are not expecting the authorization to speak about the way the class *must* be conducted and will face this ‘modern’ work as a scary *challenge*. “[W]hat most of students feel at this point is fear, the understandable terror at having to leave a familiar home” (Kegan, R.; 1994; p. 280). A common response during those moments is work avoidance. As a way of reducing the internal tension, they will expect the professor to take the work back or to divert the attention to a less challenging issue. In order to keep on facing the challenge, the class needs a *holding environment* that will help the students to start the transition to a new way of making meaning.

The act of posing open questions requires diverse habits of leadership if intends to develop some leadership capacities. Some examples are: “identifying the adaptive challenge” (Course handbook for TA; 2006; p. 70): ‘*which is the best way of using the class resources in order to learn?*’; “orient the question and direct attention to the issues” (p. 68) the class is facing: ‘*how to respond to the adaptive challenge?*’; ‘*ask them the questions?*’; “giving the work back to the people” (p. 69), and “holding steady” (p. 70): “[t]he ability to remain present for another when he is anxious, to recognize and accept his anxiety, without ourselves becoming too anxious or immediately trying to relieve the anxiety” (Kegan, 1982, p. 126). Through these habits, the professor is beginning to build a bridge to support their learning transition.

“[A] holding environment is a tricky transitional culture, an evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over. It fosters developmental transformation, or the process by which the whole (“how I am”) becomes gradually a part (“How I was”) of a new whole (“how I am now”)” (Kegan, R.; 1994; p. 43).

A way of keeping peoples attention towards the *adaptive challenges* is helping them to keep facing the gap between their expectations and their results. In this sense, the course considers failures as opportunities for development. On the following lines I will present some teaching methods to discuss how they foster development.

Teaching Methods to Develop Leadership Abilities:

Student Failures, Case-in-Point and Structured Questionnaires

Leadership Failures.

Students are asked to “choose an adaptive challenge from [their] own experience in which [they] experienced a leadership failure -- one for which unresolved questions remain” (Course handbook for TA; 2006; p. 53), and bring it to the course. These cases are used as for discussions in the big class and are the content in the weekly consultation group sessions.

A guide is provided to structure the case presentation. The use of the structured questions functions as a bridge for the students; exemplifying the kind of questions that a fourth order of mind may ask. The questions pushes the case presenter to place the adaptive

challenge at the center, to acknowledge the organization's orienting values as guiding principles and to include the perspective of all the involved constituencies. This guide helps the case presenter to use the organization's values as orientation data and to move him or her, as well as the other constituencies involved, to a peripheral position facing the same adaptive challenge.

An important aspect through the case consultation is to help the case presenter to differentiate self and roles. It is the ability to distinguish people's reactions as responses to the roles that they play rather than to whom they are (Heifetz, 1994). "This is not a prescription for keeping emotions -- values and passions -- at a distance and disingenuously playing a role. But it enables an individual not to be misled by his emotions into taking statements and events personally that may have little to do with him" (Heifetz; 1994; p. 263).

Case-in-Point

The *case-in-point* is a pedagogical approach where any living situation can be used as a case to observe, interpret and intervene. During Heifetz's course, people are expected to use this approach in order to learn *in situ* and *in real time* the experience of exercising leadership. This dynamic is structured and spontaneous. Every week has defined moments to debrief what had happened in the previous moments, and it is always open the possibility to intervene with an interpretation. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) use the image of *going to the balcony* in order to gain perspective of what is happening *in the*

dance floor. In Kegan's words, at the *dance floor* people are subject to ways of making meaning that they cannot recognize, while *going to the balcony* allows them a new perspective and become aware of the variables to which they are subject to –fostering the process of moving from subject to object. As an example, people with third order of minds may become aware of how much they need the figure of authority to be holding the direction of the class.

Structured questionnaires

Every week, the students have to answer questions about their consultation group meeting. These questionnaires “allow students the opportunity to reflect on leadership, authority, social system dynamics, and strategy as demonstrated (or not) in their consultation group, the presented case and, to a limited extent, the large class” (Course handbook for TA; 2006; p. 15). The weekly repetition of this questions foster the ways in which students not only respond but also start to frame the dynamics within their small groups and also the big class. Along the course, these weekly questionnaires vary the focus from observation to interpretation to action.

Some questions from ‘Action Questionnaire’ (p. 58) are;

1. *In thinking about your interventions this week, were there differences between what you intended and the outcomes they produced?*
2. *Which of your interventions generated work, work avoidance, some combination of the two, or go nowhere?*

3. *In retrospect, did any of your past interventions “plant seeds” for work by the group?*
4. *Identify one moment when you thought you had something worthwhile to say and you held back. What made you do so?*
5. *Identify one moment when you were able to hold steady (as distinct from holding back). How did the group react?*
6. *Were there pressures to give in and, if so, how did you withstand those pressures?*

These questions orient the students toward having a conversation with aspects of themselves. In the questions 4 and 5, the student is invited to distinguish different feeling that she may have –or feelings that have her. The distinctions between *hold back* and *hold steady* can help her to have a conversation with different aspects of her life. It is important to recognize what is *holding her back*, because that is another way of *being subject* to something –for example a certain expectation of how to respond. The act of *holding steady* is the opposite. While recognizing that there is something that *has her* and that is pushing her to *react*, she can *hold steady* in order to embrace and hold that aspect of herself that is pushing her to act.

The frequent practices along these questionnaires intend to foster people from third order to begin a conversation with their own feelings and to understand what triggers them and how to interact in a more effective way. These conversations with their own emotions are a way of fostering the movement from third to fourth order of mind.

The other side of the bridge

Purpose, Confidants and Sanctuary

During the eleventh week and facing the last three weeks of work, the course address three aspects that are related to a fourth order of mind. The bridge was constructed from the very first moment. The *adaptive* challenges that push and a holding environment that supports development worked through the course. After spending more than two months of classes, fostering a learning environment towards leadership development, the time to finish is coming quickly. The other side of the bridge is now visible and some people had become to exercise a new way of understanding leadership. It is important to build a sense of ‘self-authorship’ that could last after the course.

The themes and readings to approach that session, and from that point onwards, try to build different ways of making meaning as a fourth order of mind. Preserving a sense of purpose, finding confidants and crafting a sanctuary are three ways of keeping this ‘self-authoring’ way of making meaning.

Preserving a sense of purpose

The sense of purpose (Heifetz; 1994) is the connection a person makes with some values she or he want to use through her or his life. The purpose of a person may have an external source –still the third order of mind-, or may have developed to a fourth order, where the source is internal, functioning as a center of gravity for the person’s behavior.

Confidants

The importance of confidants (Heifetz; 1994) is to expand habits and relationships as a personal holding environment through time and space. The tensions of *adaptive challenges* from *modern life demands* will pull people to react in a comfortable defaulted way, avoiding the work that is needed. Confidants are those people with whom to talk that can use the same language because they have been through the same process of learning. They can also help people to be aware of their own *hungers* –specific ways in how a person reacts because their subjectivity to a particular situation.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary (Heifetz; 1994) is the place or the moment or the activity that a person may use to separate from its roles and connect to its purpose. It helps to keep the dialogue between the self and different aspects of the person, or different roles.

Together, the sanctuary, the confidants and the self-sense of purpose will help to keep the person in the fourth order of mind. Using these habits as well as others explained through this paper, people may develop a more comprehensive way of making meaning and will be able to deal with *adaptive challenges* and fit their skills with the demands of *modern life*.

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Appendix 1. Excerpts from course syllabus.

Course Description:

The aim of this course is to give students a fundamental and practical understanding of leadership. The course is designed for people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. The purpose is to increase significantly one's capacity to sustain the demands of leadership and to strengthen considerably one's ability to exercise both leadership and authority.

Drawing from several disciplines, the course develops a framework for diagnosing and intervening in political and organizational systems to generate adaptive work. Philosophy and biology provide a basis for understanding the concepts of paradigm, change, and adaptation. Political science and business management offer perspectives for examining the functions of authority and for distinguishing these from the exercise of leadership. Social psychology gives insight into the dynamics of social systems and an approach to diagnosing their productivity and dysfunctions. Music provides a language for working with qualities such as harmony, inspiration, timing, conducting, creativity, listening, and resolution.

Design of the course:

The course is designed to enable students to learn by a variety of means. In addition to the traditional methods of lectures, readings, and films, the course uses three more innovative teaching methods: structured exercises, student cases, and “case-in-point” learning. First, through structured exercises of both reflection and action, some of which involve poetry and music, students learn a variety of skills integral to the practice of leadership. Second, the course devotes a majority of its time to analyzing the rich variety of past professional experiences that students bring into the course -- each student presents a personal case study of leadership to his or her small weekly consultation group and works on these cases throughout the term. Third, students analyze the dynamics common to many social systems facing adaptive work by analyzing the evolving dynamics of the class itself as a case-in-point

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