

Organizational Learning, Knowledge and Contradiction

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Introduction¹

One way to ‘make waves’ is surely to propose a change in the way we understand the very title of ‘OLKC’. In this essay, I remove the word *capability* and replace it with the word *contradiction*. My central argument is that the identification of a discreet set of capabilities or competences is inevitably of limited value without a corresponding awareness of emotional and political contradictions that undermine learning – both individual and organizational. Capability implies that it is possible to highlight or capture the positive attributes that comprise a role or underpin the learning of a role. Capability is related to the ways in which individuals, groups or organizations can be prepared for action, their ‘fitness for purpose’ or required competence. Contradiction on the other hand recognises that the very skills, knowledge and competencies that we consider to be fundamental to effective action may also prevent, undermine or limit the ability to act. This is because organizations are beset with emotional and political dynamics that can render the capable incapable, or turn action into inaction (Vince, 2001).

Attempts to mobilise learning in organizations occur in the context of contradictions that characterise organizational behaviour and the structures that underpin it. The specific contradiction I explore in this essay is one surrounding learning and leadership. I use my work with MBA students as an example. The two most consistent expectations I experience from my MBA students in class (on leadership) are to: ‘make me a better leader’ and ‘tell me how to do leadership’. In part, these expectations come from individuals’ experiences as managers and leaders in organizations. In their managerial and leadership roles they carry a contradiction – that they are expected to be ‘good leaders’ but also that it is impossible to know with any certainty what this means in practice.

¹ The current version of this essay is an under-developed and incomplete initial draft. The author would therefore welcome any comments or suggestions that might help to develop and to improve the central idea (from capabilities to contradictions) or the arguments associated with this idea. Please feel free to email Russ at r.vince@bath.ac.uk

I take great care to explain to my MBA students that there is no single, consistent set of leadership skills, abilities, knowledge or competencies that can capture what leaders do. I tell them that leadership is as much collective as individual, it is surrounded by complex emotions and politics, and that it is context specific. Therefore, for example, a skill set applied by an individual with great success in one organizational context can be the same set of skills that underpin this individual's failure in a different context. I take some time to carefully outline the key components of this argument in order to get the message across that this means that it is highly unlikely that any single set of skills, competencies or capabilities devised to say what leaders should be doing is actually going to be able to explain what leaders do. However, despite my students understanding of all of this, they would still prefer it that I gave them the skills and knowledge they need 'to be a better leader'.

When we teach leadership, we are faced with a contradiction in the classroom, one that reflects a contradiction in organizations. Students would like to be given something positive that helps them to be 'a better leader' and yet they can not really learn about the messy realities of leadership in practice if we give them what they want. To put it another way – the very act of defining or prescribing a set of capabilities is part of the process of limiting the emergence of capability. My view, and the central theme of this essay, is that we have to adopt a different approach to learning about leadership in order to be able to teach leadership in ways that do justice to the emotional and political complexity of leadership in action. This connects to a broader problem for learning in organizations and for management learning. A focus on building appropriate sets of skills, knowledge and capabilities has to be set alongside the emotional and political dynamics that get in the way of learning – that render individuals incapable of action and produce 'incompatible institutional arrangements (contradictions)' (Seo and Creed, 2002).

The contradictions of learning about leadership

The mainstream leadership literature focuses primarily on the individual leader and on positive prescriptions for leadership behaviour and action. Leaders do positive things: they listen to us, they help us to make sense, they win resources, and they articulate a vision. A review of business literature on the study of leadership and leadership development undertaken for the National College for Schools Leadership (NCSL, 2003) identified a range of books and readings that leaders would themselves recommend on leadership, under the heading: 'What Leaders Read'. (All documents are available from the NCSL web pages at: <http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/>). The researchers identified around 25 key books; they undertook reviews of content and constructed summaries. There are many ways to use this resource. I looked at the resource in relation to the question of what leaders do. I distilled information from the resource into a single PowerPoint slide representing what these books say about what leaders do (see Figure 1), and as a way of emphasizing the tendency to prescribe positive behaviour. I call this 'the ultimate PowerPoint slide on leadership'.

Figure 1: What Leaders Do

- Leaders help determine the meaning of events
- Leaders build agreement around objectives and strategies
- Leaders build task commitment and optimism
- Leaders develop mutual trust and co-operation
- Leaders strengthen collective identity
- Leaders organize and co-ordinate activities
- Leaders encourage and facilitate collective learning (i.e. shared experiences, the pooling of knowledge and skills)
- Leaders obtain the necessary resources and support
- Leaders develop and empower people
- Leaders promote social justice and ethical behaviour (rather than abusing the authority of their role).

A very high percentage of books on leadership emphasize the positive, because they are concerned with promoting: the ‘best way’ to do leadership, with what works (‘best practice’), and with selling their own model or approach. A less obvious aspect of this list is in the way in which it touches a strong desire from students and practitioners for an ‘ultimate PowerPoint slide on leadership’ that tells us what leaders do; as well as representing the hope that such a slide, that captures the ‘truth’ about leadership, might actually exist. It is the desire to be ‘a better leader’ that promotes and sustains the fantasy of a better self – a self that entertains mostly what is positive about our interactions with others from leadership roles and relations. If this list is transformed into its opposite – a description of leaders’ negative behaviour, it actually seems to provide a more realistic and convincing picture (at least for me) of ‘what leaders do’ in practice (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: What Leaders Do

- Leaders control and/or undermine the meaning of events for personal or political reasons
- Leaders create conflicts around objectives and strategies
- Leaders get in the way of task commitment, their behaviour can foster cynicism and apathy
- Leaders are often not trusted or trusting
- Leaders weaken collective identity, they work and make decisions in isolation
- Leaders are disorganized and they fragment activities
- Leaders discourage and avoid sharing (because sharing is not always to their advantage)
- Leaders can't get hold of the resources they want and complain about the lack
- Leaders undermine and disempower people
- Leaders are dismissive of ethics and social justice and regularly abuse the authority of their role.

This is a brief illustration of an important point for understanding leadership, that the tendency to emphasize the positive is not helpful in understanding leadership in practice. It is the very fantasy of becoming a better leader, of being a better self, that makes us believe that a 'strife-ridden', 'unpleasant' and 'vicious' organization is in fact 'an admirable place' (Bollas, 1993: 184). Addressing contradictions apparent in the exercise of leadership can shift the focus from a concern with individual effectiveness towards a concern with emotional, relational and political processes generated in and generating social conditions (Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2010). This will mean less of an emphasis on the leader and more on leadership in context.

We can connect with relational and critical theories of leadership in order to develop these ideas further. A relational perspective on leadership is concerned with processes, viewing 'persons' leadership and other relational realities as *made* in processes' (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 655). In other words, leadership is generated in social dynamics (Cunliffe, 2009). The relational perspective shifts the focus from the individual leader or manager to the collective dynamic of leadership – to combinations of interacting relations and contexts. This shift raises the question of how one identifies whether the relational process is really leadership, and a particular focus is given to the idea that relational processes can be understood as leadership 'when the social influence that is generated contributes to the emergence of social order' (control) 'and new approaches, attitudes, goals' (change) (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 667). Another way to express this would be to say that relational processes can be understood as leadership through the *contradictions* that are generated between attempts to control and to change.

A critical approach to leadership considers how leadership is shaped by and creates relations of power. ‘There is no escape from leadership, like power it is everywhere; and understanding leadership in relation to power and authority is paramount’ (Western 2008: 56). Power can be understood in relation to *resistance*, through: ‘innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflicts, of struggles...’ and within ‘symbolic and material forms of resistance such as ambivalence, resignation, toleration, theft, non-cooperation, sabotage, confrontation, collective action, formal complaints, legal action, or violence’ (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007: 1334). Contradictions are at the heart of this view of ‘resistance leadership’, where the ‘attributions of leadership themselves are formed and influenced by power/knowledge constructions’ (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007) and connected to a continuous tension between resistance to and reproduction of power relations. What this means in practice is that: ‘leaders need to understand that their activities create waves of substantive symbolic and political consequences that may not be fully evident in the passing moment’ (Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2010: 85). Relational and critical literature on leadership provides a theoretical base from which to comprehend how contradictions are integral to leadership. Rather than attempting to offer a fixed position on what leaders do, it may be more useful to capture the experience of *doing* leadership as a practical activity in complex organizations through ‘the dynamic, collective, situated and dialectical nature of leadership practices’ (Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2010).

Leaders inevitably carry contradictions within their work roles. For example, leaders are expected to be both the champions of change and the guardians of the status quo in organizations (Vince, 2004). This tension between control and change generates emotions that are avoided and covered up. For example, fears about our own failings are transformed into blame of others (Vince and Saleem, 2004) and our own anxieties emphasise ‘the inconsistency of the other’ (Salecl, 2004). Covering up the tensions between change and control, conceals the struggle to lead in the (emotional and political) complexity of organizations; and it promotes both prescriptive leader behaviour and instrumental approaches to leadership. Leadership in practice therefore becomes informed by denying the complex emotional dynamics of leadership in favour of a set of (positive) capabilities. As leaders, we may genuinely feel that we are empowering others at the same time as we manipulate them. If we convince ourselves that we are empowering others then it will not seem as if we are manipulating them. If we over-emphasise the light, the positive, the good feelings in organizations then there is a danger that we make implicit contradictions covert or illegitimate. This promotes a delusional understanding of leadership behaviour, making it unlikely that leaders will perceive the harmful consequences of their own helpfulness; they will oversimplify leadership by removing its emotional and relational complexity. I think that learning about the contradictions inherent in leadership is as important as defining and delivering the capabilities of leadership. I want to try to explain further why addressing the contradictions of learning about leadership is important.

Leadership is tied to action. ‘Those who aspire to lead must figure out what leadership is in the context of what they do and persuade themselves and others that they are doing it’ (Fairhurst, 2009: 1609). In addition, ‘talking about leadership, writing about leadership,

using the concept in any way, shape or form is the product of some form of action' (Kelly, 2008: 768). Leadership takes shape through the reflexive qualities of 'leadership-in-action' (Kelly, 2008). This phrase 'leadership-in-action' represents the reflexive relationship between leadership and practice. How leadership is defined, imagined and practiced within a specific organizational context is formed and influenced by power/knowledge constructions over time; and these constructions gradually create and establish the emotional and political dynamics of leadership that constitute 'the way we do things here' as leaders.

The politics surrounding leadership in organizations also trigger a contradictory dynamic. This can be called *leadership inaction* and it arises because leaders are always confronted with not being in control (both in fear and in fact). As leaders we have conscious and unconscious knowledge, fantasies and perceptions about when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action; when to avoid coalitions and collective action; and the organizational dynamics which underpin a failure or refusal to act. We often know what the political limits of leadership are in our organizations without having to be told; we collude with others in order to create limitations on leadership; and we are often aware of what is and is not going to be seen as a legitimate result of our attempts to lead and to influence. We are (consciously or unconsciously) aware of the organizational dynamics that underpin inaction *at the same time* as we are positively engaged in leadership activities in practice.

The separation of leadership-in-action and leadership inaction as concurrent aspects of leadership practice reduces our ability to understand both positive and negative leadership roles and relations. The political nature of organizations and organizing mean that it is not helpful for individuals to imagine that leadership is enacted only from being positive. Such a position conflates the positive with an 'authentic', 'emotionally stable' or 'advanced' individual, one who carries a 'belief in their ability to control their lives' (Ilies, Margeson and Nahrag, 2005). Greater focus on the contradictions that underpin leadership roles will help us to comprehend that all leaders carry complicated and contradictory feelings into their roles, for example, between the desire to empower and to undermine people, and that such seemingly conflicting desires are concurrent (Kets de Vries, 2004).

Although it may seem that these contradictions get in the way of becoming 'better leaders' and 'better selves', we fail to see that Figures 1 and 2 (above) *both* represent what leaders do all the time. It is the tension between (e.g.) leaders' simultaneous desires to empower and to undermine people that make such contradictions significant. Doing leadership is not only a practical activity; it can also be emotional and political *inactivity*. It is important therefore to balance approaches to leadership that have a focus on (e.g.) authenticity, self-awareness and self-regulation, with approaches that place the emotional and political dynamics of leadership at their heart. It is this engagement with the emotions and politics of leadership in practice that will allow us to integrate and to better understand the contradictions that are inherent in leadership roles, and the contradictions apparent in learning about leadership that reinforce a one-sided perspective on learning about and doing leadership. The task of attempting to become 'a better leader' through

the fantasy of constructing a better self can be replaced by a desire to make the contradictory, self-defeating and self-limiting aspects of leadership roles and relations an overt subject in learning about leadership.

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