

# 1. Beyond the ‘spider’s web’: an introduction to *The Field Guide to Leadership Development*

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Whilst reviewing and editing the chapters for this book we have recognised that most of the authors have had previous experience with ‘planks and barrels’ type experiential interventions.<sup>1</sup> By this we mean outdoor physical experiential development exercises. One of us, Steve, for example, recalls an incident with a ‘spider’s web’ exercise with a group (ropes tied together and stretched between two poles to form a spider’s web – teams challenged to get through the holes without touching the rope, with each closed after an attempt):

I was called up by the client (I was programme director). Much anxiety and concern. One of her colleagues in undertaking the spider’s web had dislocated his shoulder. So the story goes: the facilitator moved away to answer a call on his mobile phone. The manager in question had ‘seized the day’ and dived through a high-up ‘hole’ in the web. In part the client’s anxiety was for the chap; but also that the manager was suing the company for making him undertake such an activity. Her question: ‘Does the university’s insurance policy cover this?’

Such activities as this, and the barrels and planks to cross metaphoric ‘shark-infested swamps’, have been key components or mainstays of many leadership development interventions for a number of decades. Many training companies have been set up to deliver programmes with these types of interventions as a central element. Physical experiential activities tend to be exciting and far from the occasional dullness of classroom didactic teaching and death by PowerPoint slides. Indeed, how could declarative knowledge distilled into colourful PowerPoint slides provide insight into individual practices of leading? The experiential ‘spider’s web’ enables facilitators to probe participants’ problem-solving skills, or team communications displayed. However, even this mode of learning has similar problems of transference to the organisational setting. Often the

insights of the high-octane activity are very tangential from everyday complexity of organisational leadership. Issues of institutional power, politics, unstated assumptions, histories of practice, emerging identities, or aspects such as emotional labour and emotional dissonance do not cross over into the metaphoric leadership task of safely crossing the ‘shark-infested swamp’ with the barrels and planks. But a good time, apparently, has been had by all (except the manager with the dislocated shoulder).

Yet we do not want to lose the excitement of experiential learning, and all the fun that goes with that. We assert, from the voices of all chapter authors herein, that our collective evidence speaks to experiential learning being most efficacious in leadership learning transference. We argue that such efficacy is enhanced by connecting experiential activity with three interrelated aspects: reflection, theory and practice (most similar to Kolb’s early work (1984), which has been recently updated to offer a more complex and nuanced interpretation: Bergsteiner and Avery, 2014). We suggest that these three aspects have not been well served by barrels and planks, or indeed didactic classroom pedagogies. We suggest that ‘experiential activities’ in the main tend not to follow the full route of experiential learning as advocated by Kolb, but instead remain decontextualised activities. Too often the use of experiential projects is limited in viewing the activity as merely metaphoric (Belling et al., 2004). It is simply an opportunity to reflect and explore on experiences, assumptions and practices; unless of course you are faced with a ‘shark-infested swamp’, or your way is blocked by a giant spider’s web.

Creative methods of seeking to develop leadership practice have been gaining precedence over more conventional classroom methods (see Edwards et al., 2013, 2015). Although these standard and conventional methods can be used to impart knowledge for its own sake – and are certainly a common necessity for meeting needs of accreditation – they can fail to enable leadership development through not addressing how leadership practice is learned. Leadership cannot be taught as if someone was coming cold to the topic for the first time, as for example might be the case with accounting and finance. Evidence suggests it can be learned from an early age, even as early as the age of three (Barnes et al., 2015). It is broadly understood that lived experience shapes our practice of leading. It has been mostly unconsciously learned, from moments that are hard to recall and are absorbed into a tacit store of practical knowledge. In addition, we also recognise that leadership is a relational phenomenon (see Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Seen through a relational lens, leadership is learned interpersonally through observation, participation and enactment that forms relational identities and practices anchored to specific contexts (Kempster, 2009) – a dynamic that is never-ending. In this way we

offer up the notion of leadership learning and development as a process of situated leader as an incomplete or never-ending journey. This is in contrast to the process of leadership learning and development as having a destination, or end or final outcome – the notion of becoming a leader. Becoming has a forward trajectory that is always drawn from the past. Importantly, the becoming is interconnected with others – it is a relational process that similarly has a past and an ongoing trajectory. In this way, leader becoming is not a singular process, but rather an interconnected and malleable dynamic. Leadership development of an individual needs to be considered as situated leadership development of a greater system (a point developed by Day, 2001, who distinguished between leader and leadership development).

We recognise that becoming is gradual, and learning in this way is rarely noticed, occurring imperceptibly through life's course. Major moments – such as critical incidents, episodes, hardships, trigger points – can be recognised, yet so much of what occurs in the becoming is most difficult to access and recognise. Intervention methods that can help reveal something of this process of becoming seem most critical if leader and leadership development is to be constructive and effective. The methods need to be able to enable someone to explore such hard-to-retrieve experiences of being led and leading, emergent implicit theories of leading, everyday tacit practices of leading, and a related sense of relational identity associated with leadership. This is the challenge we have given to all chapter authors.

The common theme that connects all aspects within this book is the central mechanism of reflection.

The reflective aspect is fundamental if the relational, contextual and emergent aspects of leadership practice are to be brought into focus. Reflective leadership, then, is making visible the underlying influences that shape activity in order that individuals can consciously shape their everyday practice. Thus, however exciting barrels and planks might be, if they do not speak to revealing the complexity of leader becoming through reflexive engagement then the ability to enact purposeful change relevant to a person's context will be heavily restricted. The emphasis we give throughout this book to reflection speaks to the central orientation of making sense of experience. Without conscious and organised reflection, the experience of everyday activity that imperceptibly shapes who we are and how we behave remains for the most part out of reach. We continue to be shaped by the contexts and the experiences we engage in. Mechanisms of how to make this conscious, and shape reflection, is what each and every chapter seeks to do.

At this point we wish to define some terms with regard to reflection. Reflection, critical reflection and reflexivity are interrelated terms that

need to be clarified as these will be important lenses through which to make sense of the various chapters and the approaches outlined therein. Mike Reynolds (1998) has helpfully offered a distinction between reflection and the notion of critical reflection. Reflection is a process of making thoughtful and productive use of experience for future action, while critical reflection is seen as enriching our sense-making of the experience to 'an analysis of power and control and an examination of the taken-for-granted within which the [experience] is situated' (1998, p.189). In essence, critical reflection is concerned with questioning assumptions, paying particular attention to power relationships, and is concerned with emancipation (Mezirow, 1985; Reynolds, 1998). Using Goffman's (1969) work, reflexivity focuses on an individual making sense of themselves, positioned and impacted by underlying power relations. Goffman's assertion is that an individual needs to be able to stand 'outside the stage' in order to understand and interpret how meaning and activity is being shaped on the 'front stage and back stage' (1969, p.107) in which she/he is a participant.

The depth of conscious awareness of appreciating the different aspects of reflection from critical reflection and personal reflexivity can be seen through Burgoyne and Hodgson's (1983) work that adapted Bateson's (1973) three levels of learning: level one reflects naturalistic learning drawn from everyday experience related to undertaking a specific activity – it is not usually transferable; level two is similarly naturalistic learning but is recognised by an individual as capable of being transferred to another situation, but does not recognise the underlying features that influence the learning; level three learning sees an individual as being able to make sense of the world around them, including the underlying influences (Burgoyne and Hodgson, 1983). Connecting with Argyris and Schon's (1978) concept of single- and double-loop learning, the single loop represents habits and everyday practices connected to the background situational consciousness (arguably levels one and two); and the deeper double-loop learning relates to changes affecting underlying values and general orientations (reflect level three). It is to double-loop level three that various approaches in this volume are seeking to stimulate within leadership development. It is argued that such reflection at level-three learning does occur naturalistically as a consequence of transformative incidents or episodes. Mezirow (1985) argues that significant triggers such as marker events or disorientating dilemmas (Mezirow, 1981) enable an individual to question their historic interpretation of their learning biography. These critical moments open up questions of taken-for-granted assumptions of events, and people within events, in order to generate critical reflection and personal reflexivity. It is through such critical reflexivity that an individual is capable

of seeing and understanding the world they are part of and constructed within (similarly developed by Reynolds, 1998) and arguably allows an individual to see afresh how situations influence thought and action. As a consequence, embracing reflexivity can offer a new perspective and an individual can take control in terms of their own development. Returning again to the 'spider's web' incident, we speculate on the manager suing the company. His reflection might be something like this:

The company had sent me on the course and it is their fault that I am injured. I mean the exercise is about taking the lead after all – that was the purpose of the course!

However, a very different reflection could have been drawn. If the manager was enabled to undertake a critical reflection of the incident, he might have been able to explore his desire to perform in front of others, his desire to take the lead – was this part of a moment of release from constraining instructions that limit his sense of himself? Did he wish to challenge his narrative identity by demonstrating possibilities of being heroic? Being heroic or tragic are discourses that permeate our lives and shape us in daily acts. If any of these questions were explored there would be a revealing of underlying structures and powers, unstated but pervasive assumptions that impose limits and expectations on people. Using a reflexive orientation the incident could have been reframed as a powerful moment for sense-making that reaches beyond the painful shoulder. We are not, of course, suggesting that designs for leadership development should inflict pain – physical or mental – far from it. However, it does illustrate how experiential moments can trigger insight into the taken-for-granted aspects that play out in shaping our pathways of leader becoming.

## SO WHY A FIELD GUIDE?

We have developed this edited collection of reflections on leadership learning and development practice as we believe there are few books that have been written with this overt orientation. Few books have been written explicitly on leadership development. Rather, it is left to the leadership studies textbooks to try to incorporate this large field of practice into one or two chapters. Of notable exception is the *Handbook of Leadership Development* (McCauley et al., 1998), which we think is a most useful contribution. Its central argument is a triple lock of: challenge, assessment and support – all three needing to be designed into an intervention to develop a leader. We shall draw on these principles in this book. The distinctiveness

that we seek to achieve here is to place emphasis on the following elements: reflection, dialogue, creativity, relationality and a practice orientation.

Debates on the necessity for leadership development to draw on these five aspects are often buried in academic texts and periodicals, remarkably inaccessible to the commissioners of leadership programmes. Authors and academics – some of whom are in this volume – have been researching into creative methods of development for many years. Their findings hint at a cornucopia of methods that would enhance and enliven the delivery of leadership development. The evidence-based understanding of the effectiveness of approaches that are relational-oriented have also been well documented – see for example the LEAD programme (Barnes et al., 2015). So rather than this being a handbook of ‘nice’ or wishful ideas, it is based on research and practice of many interventions applied and refined over many years. Although some of the methodological approaches may appear rather unconventional, what is evident in the chapters to follow is the effect that can occur on participants and the impact that the techniques can have on practice.

The book is laid out as a ‘field guide’ because we want it to be used in the ‘field’ – used by designers of leadership development in crafting their programmes. We offer plenty of possible approaches in order to provide scope for the multiplicity of contexts that leadership development programmes are challenged to address. We have sought a variety of contributions that draw from a plethora of backgrounds. All have been tested, evaluated and revised.

A most impressive range of academics, practitioners and ‘actioners’ have contributed to this field guide, both in academically rigorous extrapolations of theory and research but also in the wide-ranging practical application of these and other ideas evolving from their use in workshops and organisational development settings. These colleagues of ours have enthusiastically offered up their considerable knowledge, experience and insight into leadership development. We have requested that every chapter follows Peters and Waterman’s (1982) old adage of a loose–tight structure – tight with regard to asking all chapter authors to follow a structure that has three (and a bit) elements:

- First, to consider the theoretical underpinnings of the approach. We have taken the view that however good the process might be its success relates in no small part to drawing on a firm foundation. For all authors there was a great sense of clarity for the underpinning ideas that shaped their specific pedagogy. In this volume there is a rich array of theories. In part this provides an unconventional introduction to debates and perspectives that explore leadership,

- learning, reflection and development; but also we hope it will provide a stimulus and resource for further reading and reflection.
- Second, to explore the process being offered up in the chapter. The intent here was to create sufficient detail that someone would be able to use the ideas to frame a design. Most authors have sought to achieve this by writing most candidly of the process – the successes and failures, the changes, aspects dropped and new parts included – as they have travelled their learning journey. For the most part this is undertaken in the first person and seeks to make the experience being described as graphic and insightful as possible. It is anticipated that the approaches seem possible, realistic and enticing; inviting a sense of imagining the possibilities of undertaking the processes within a leadership development programme. We hope for many readers that the ideas will be a ‘hit’; they may resonate and open avenues of experimenting and reshaping what is being suggested in terms of contextual practicalities.
  - Third, the need to reflect on the learning journey of designing the leadership development intervention. With the anticipated readership of leadership development practitioners, or human resources (HR) managers, or researchers curious about the topic, we wanted to provide a space in which other practitioners could share their reflections. The tightness of the editorial policy was to provoke the authors to be reflexive of their process, themselves and the potential of their designs. For some authors the reflections are on the learning resulting from undertaking the process. For others the attention is forward to the possibilities of change that the process might bring – for the leaders, teams, organisations and even communities they serve. But also some authors reflect on topics that they feel have been underutilised in the leadership development field thus far.

The ‘bit’ is a summary (in bullet points) of tips, or must haves, for the process to be successful. This is deliberately brief and practical. We hope that it provides space in the book for any reflections, insights, comments or questions that a reader might have. In this way we want the book to have potential as a field resource – capable of being scribbled on and personalised – for use in design meetings or indeed in the ‘to connect to field’ during and after activity. And, of course, we would like to hear back on experiences gained from the use of the field guide, so that we too can continue to learn from experience.

The final element of the ‘tight’ writing structure has been the restricted word length. All authors have been up against it trying to distil their wonderful work down to 5,000 words (which we have kept to in this opening

chapter). This is simply to fulfil a desire to include a rich variety of leadership development interventions – hence the relatively large number of chapters (17).

Within this ‘tightness’ the evidence of the ‘looseness’ in this volume will be so very evident on reading the eclectic range of chapters. Most notable is the breadth of style and orientation. We have clustered authors into particular themes. This is in order to allow readers to select the area of most interest and to see the variety of different methods within each theme. Part I is about relational-based approaches. Part II is centred on narrative-based approaches. Part III examines the use of artefact-based approaches. Part IV considers place-based approaches. Part V is reflective practice-centred approaches. We provide a brief glimpse of the ‘looseness’ with an overview of the chapters clustered within each of these themes.

In Chapter 2 Donna Ladkin pursues the idea of practice-based approaches to developing ethically responsible leaders. Five design elements are explained and described as integral elements for developing ‘offline’ ethical approaches to real-time ethical dilemmas.

In Chapter 3 Scott Allen, Arthur Schwartz and Daniel Jenkins outline the collegiate leadership competition whereby there is an opportunity for deliberate practice on the road to expertise. This collegiate leadership competition engages students in practice, which includes declarative knowledge, understanding group dynamics and skilful intervention.

In Chapter 4 Stewart Barnes, Sue Smith and Steve Kempster look at leadership development through a quasi-non-executive board in the context of the small to medium-sized enterprise. The use of the prism of non-executive leadership, as a form of a community of practice, opens out development of capacity and confidence.

In Chapter 5 James Campbell Quick, Keri DeCay, Navadha Modha and John Goolsby describe a technique called biographical inquiry. This follows a belief that skilled performance can be learnt from masterful descriptions of people’s journeys through leadership as well as amassing their own experience through research and interviews.

In Chapter 6 Andrew Armitage explores leadership development using the poetic voice of care ethics. He examines the role of poetry in understanding both context and settings as well as developing imaginative ideas to deal with chaotic environments. This work helps to develop an alternative paradigm to standard leadership development programmes through open and reflexive dialogue.

In Chapter 7 Doris Schedlitzki, Carol Jarvis and Janice MacInnes describe their use of Greek mythology in instilling deep and critical self-reflection in leaders. This chapter evaluates the usefulness of working with Greek mythology to enhance self-reflection and, through the discussion

of an example, seeks to outline the role of archetypes in self-reflective practice.

In Chapter 8 Steve Kempster retells the story of his 'tent' exercise in constructing a narrative of leadership learning through detailed examination of a timeline. Steve's research shaped an intervention design to allow participants to gain access to unexplored, unrecognised and tacit knowledge. He offers us the notion of leadership development as narrative identity.

In Chapter 9 Emma Watton and Philippa Chapman run through their use of leadership artefacts, which relates to a process of storytelling within groups. Their technique is often used as a warm-up with newly formed groups but has lots of potential for customisation. Little attention has been paid to artefacts in learning and this chapter prompts us to think about how artefacts enable striking insights into the leader's sense of values, identity and purpose.

In Chapter 10 Jon Billsberry and Carolyn Egri describe their technique for leadership development through videography that engages participants in close observation of human behaviour, and that creates a strong resonance in retention, interpretation and experiences of leadership. The practical instructions on how to set this up liberate the opportunity for videography in many leadership development courses.

In Chapter 11 Arthur Turner expands on his use of multi-ethnic, contemporary and historical puppets. These mediating objects have been used across a wide range of leadership development activities, including introductions, action learning, and reflective practice and coaching. Their use is both stimulating and unusual, which often creates a visceral learning atmosphere within the dynamics of the group.

In Chapter 12 Wadii Serhane, Sigrid Endres and Jürgen Weibler articulate their method called 'seeing beyond the usual', using the notion of a social photo matrix. It is a socioanalytical method of experiential leadership development and it draws on expressive and creative work-related media. By using photographs this method helps to reach more deeply held ideas on sociocultural functions and associations that shape our daily practice.

In Chapter 13 Fiona Kennedy and Ralph Bathurst offer us examples of their leadership development work in developing the practice of sense framing. They describe an approach to the practice of framing that engages participants to firmly appreciate the socially constructed and experienced nature of leadership.

In Chapter 14 Beverley Hawkins and Gareth Edwards highlight the ways in which they embrace liminality – the anthropological concept describing human learning spaces that are experienced at times of transit in a human life. The concept of liminality allows for insights into learning about

leadership through the experience of space and moments of being neither here nor there.

In Chapter 15 Jonathan Gosling and Simon Western describe their 'Lead2Lead' programme, which uses observational learning as a means of learning about leadership from each other. Having received initial coaching and training in observational skills, pairs of delegates shadow each other and then use this experience to debrief and learn from the experience through reflection.

In Chapter 16 Steve Kempster and Simon Bainbridge draw on Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as a way of exploring leadership as purpose within leadership development. By creating a multi-disciplinary approach, the autobiographical poem of Wordsworth acts as both a physical and metaphorical journey allowing for leadership learning that generates a profound sense of purpose and vocation to everyday leadership practice.

Finally, in Chapter 17 Steve Kempster, Eric Guthey and Mary Uhl-Bien highlight the use of an approach called leadership development as collaborative. This approach seeks to engage leaders in addressing societal challenges. It draws on the notion of design science to organise leadership influence in tackling current world leadership issues. A series of case study vignettes are offered; for example, working with the Danish Red Cross and the engagement of major businesses in supporting social integration of refugees. We have positioned this chapter last as it opens up discussion on the research possibilities for leadership development, to help stimulate debate on linking leadership development with leadership research – a form of research and development (R&D) of the leadership field.

The great variety of creative approaches contained within this volume will hopefully provide insight, reflection and creativity for advancing the field of leadership development. It has been the collective endeavour of all contributors that a focus on leadership practice can be enhanced through stimulating reflection on the lived experience of leadership – the raw material that has shaped how we learn to lead. Without enabling those who lead to obtain a rich reflective access to the building blocks of practice, they are captured by their pasts to repeat historic orientations without a realisation of such reoccurrence. Practices of leading are difficult to recognise by the owner, yet the impact is profoundly recognised by all those they seek to lead. It is a cruel asymmetry – those leading being so unaware of what they do every day, but yet having such detailed insights to offer. If we were speaking of sport, for instance, it is common for the practice to be observed and detailed feedback offered, usually by a recognised 'expert'. In a sense it is what is developed through deliberate practice – as Scott Allen, Arthur Schwartz and Daniel Jenkins (Chapter 3, this volume) so wonderfully articulate. It would be developed on the 'practice field'.

What then are the 'practice fields' of leadership? How can Allen et al.'s argument for deliberate practice be undertaken within everyday organisational leadership? What is palpably clear is that leadership practice needs attention, and as such has to become highly salient to those who lead. The leadership development industry has this task as its central purpose. The related question must surely be: how can we enable those who lead to practise leading in the same way as they might rehearse to become better at, for example, playing a musical instrument? There is the notion that 10,000 hours of practice creates a master (Ericsson et al., 1993). Yet so few managers can describe in any detail how they practise to become better at leading. How can a manager expect to be able to effectively lead others if they do not set about practising? Drawing on a golf analogy, the professional golfer practises for a few hours, going through a deliberate practice drill, before hitting the first ball off the tee. The amateur turns up at the last minute, grabs a driver, swings it around a few times and hopes to be able to hit this straight down the fairway. The outcome is, usually, notwithstanding an occasional lucky connection, a wasted round of golf as the ball has been hit off the fairway. In the same way, why should managers be able to deliver a commanding speech – one that raises the confidence and levels of motivation in their team to come together to move collectively towards a desired outcome – by simply standing up and speaking? The leaderful moment, like the tee shot, has been wasted. For much of the rest of the day the negative repercussions flow as a result of the lack of preparation. Reflection is (or needs to become) a significant aspect of a manager's everyday practice. An important step is learning how to practise reflection and, in the spirit of deliberate practice, becoming better and better at reflection.

In this way the book is but a start in this direction. The variety of approaches outlined herein are perhaps opening up principles and approaches that might migrate to an organisational practice field. We hope that colleagues engaging in leadership development may greatly enhance this first step towards developing leadership practice fields.

## NOTE

1. This term 'planks and barrels' is a catch-all phrase that is in common use in and around outdoor learning and refers to the many exercises and approaches that are physical in nature. These exercises might include moorland walking, building rope bridges or solving challenges through the use of unfamiliar equipment in the outdoors. Frequently, such organised exercises are followed by reflective sessions and/or theoretical classroom exercises and are part of an overall approach to learning.

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