

**Association of Leadership Educators Annual Meeting
Emerging Leadership**

**Toronto, Ontario
July 13-15, 2000**

**Entering the Social Evolutionary Process:
The Role of Leadership Education in the Emergence of Leadership**

by

**Chester J. Bowling, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist
Community Leadership and Management
Ohio State University Extension**

How does leadership emerge in a group, organization or community? Is there a way to accelerate the process? What role, if any, does leadership education play in the emergence of leadership? These are some of the questions raised in this paper.

One definition of emerge is “to come into being through evolution” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition, 1997). This paper suggests that through the richness of human social evolution leadership emerges. Social evolution, as used here, is the collaborative/cooperative social process that promotes the working out or development of human forms of organizing. This use of evolution should not be confused with the competitive process that Darwin (1936) called natural selection. During the experimental/improvisational social evolutionary process groups, organizations, communities and societies consciously and unconsciously create ways of being together that further their collective goals. Over time these improvisations become habits or practices. Ultimately they become an integral part of the social architecture. The paper further suggests that leadership education and a process known as Appreciative Inquiry can be important ways of accelerating the social evolutionary process.

Institutionalization and structuration are both theories build on the notion that over time organizations and societies create their social arrangements through collective repetitive action. Institutionalization is a description of the ways companies, who do business together, modify their structures, policies and procedures to facilitate their collaborative activities. For a more complete explanation of institutionalization see The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis (Powell and DiMaggio, Eds. 1991). Structuration is a description of how societies and cultures are constructed through the everyday actions-turned-habits of the members of the society. For a more complete explanation of structuration see: The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984).

While groups, organizations, communities and societies are actively, although not always consciously,

creating their social infrastructure social scientists are watching. In the early stages of formation the experimental and improvisational activities look like chaos to the scientists. As practices become habitual the scientists begin to notice patterns. These patterns become the base material for their work. They record, reflect on, theorize about and ultimately describe, usually in great detail, the practices and structures they observe. This is one more piece of the institutionalization and structuration process.

Scientists, especially college professors, are some of the most respected members of our society. Hardly a day goes by when without a quote or story from a member of the academy in the New York Times or on NPR. This respect comes both by virtue of their advanced degrees and their knowledge. When they speak as experts the populace pays attention and gives credence to the opinion, thus reinforcing or abating the practice depending on the opinion expressed. A good example of almost carte blanche intellectual authority given to social scientists is the example of the business-reengineering craze of the mid 1990's started by Michael Hammer and James Champy who wrote, Reengineering the corporation: a manifesto for business revolution. Just three years after that book was published Michael Hammer wrote, Beyond reengineering: how the process-centered organization is changing our work and our lives. The second book is Hammer's attempt to reverse the almost verbatim adoption by the business community of the material in the first book. Once the practices and structures have been organized into a nice neat theory they are more accessible to the person on the street. It might be argued that the job of social scientists is to take the richness of human interaction and make it accessible. Unfortunately what tends to get lost in the process is the richness of human interaction, but that is the subject of another paper.

Eventually educators, who have been educated by the social scientists and some of whom are now social scientists themselves, teach practitioners the scientific theories about the structures and practices. During the educational process educators use stories and practical experiences to translate what they have learned from the social scientists. It might be argued that the job of a teacher is to translate information for students so that it can be assimilated into the student's epistemological and ontological system. If the educator is successful the information is converted into knowledge. It is highly likely that the knowledge that is created is knowledge that the practitioners already know. That is to say, it is something they have been doing that the social scientists observed, thought and wrote about, taught to the educator who then taught it to the practitioner. Perhaps when a practitioner most willingly accepts a theory it is because they already have adopted the practice. But isn't that obvious to them? Yes it probably is and in those cases the knowledge created probably reinforces what the practitioner already thought was true.

There are probably lots of cases where the information does not, for a number of reasons, get translated to knowledge. The main reason might be a major difference between the social scientists' and practitioners' epistemological and ontological systems. When the gulf is too great practitioners cannot transform information into knowledge and they ultimately reject or modify the theory. In Out of Women's Experience Helen Regan and Gwen Brooks tell the story of coming through an educational system that was a mismatch with their way of knowing. At first it caused confusion and doubt on their part. Eventually they created their own theories of leadership that fit their experiences. Regan and Brooks point to the richness in human interaction that is often lost in the "either or" translation to theory by social scientists.

The good news is that the groups, organizations, communities and societies are dynamic. They literally refuse to be put in a theory box. Like Regan and Brooks when a theory doesn't move people they set it aside and look for an explanation that does fit with their experience. It is during this phase that the cycle starts anew. New improvisations and experiments lead to new practices and structures, which are observed by the social scientists and so on.

This evolutionary cycle has important implications for leadership education. Leadership educators have the opportunity to make the process explicit for practitioners. Helping practitioners see their dual role as both the source and consumer of leadership innovations should strengthen practitioners' sense of agency and efficacy. By raising practitioners' awareness their ability to experiment/improvise should increase. This should accelerate the social evolutionary process. Making the process explicit should also help practitioners enlarge their image of what is possible in the domain of human social arrangements. Some social scientists (Reason, 1994) have even suggested that there is value in including practitioners in the research process. Doing so should further accelerate the creation of better, more value congruent ways of organizing.

All of the above may have a down side. For the most part researchers have been observing structures and practices. The assumption is that replicating those that work and avoiding those that don't will bring success. The long-term effects of such type research will lead to the slowing of social evolution and/or practitioner frustration. The slowing will come as a result of reduced improvisation and experimentation if practitioners are only encouraged to replicate structures and practices. The frustration for practitioners will come as they attempt to replicate results in different contexts. Knowing what has worked may be a powerful tool but probably not because it can be replicated. If the group, organization, community or society is a dynamic system replication may be irrelevant. If the system is in a constant state of white water it is likely that what worked last time will not work this time. What did not work last time might be just the thing to do this time. Human systems are far too complex to be reduced to five easy steps of this or six things to avoid of that.

If leadership education is not about teaching people about the five fastest ways to success or the six biggest mistakes to avoid, there must be something else we need to know, what is it? We need to know: What in this particular context or setting is making organizing possible? We also need to know: What are the possibilities, expressed or latent, that provides opportunities for more effective forms of organizing? We need to know: What is giving life to this group, organization, community or society? We need to know how to make more of that happen. The only way to determine what is giving life to a group is to ask about their peak moments. Moments when they felt the most excited engaged or even inspired by what they were doing. From the data will eventually come themes that point to forces, factors, structures and practices that give life to the group. This process is called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI was created by a group of people from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. David Cooperrider (2000) has written the most about AI and has used it extensively. There are four phases in the AI process. They are Discovery, Dream, Design and Deliver. During the Discovery phase you discover and value those factors that give life to the community; for example, what do you value most about yourself, your neighbors, the community organizations of which you are a part? What in your view is making a positive difference to the quality of life in your community? What contribution

are you making that you are especially proud of? When have you been the most excited, inspired or engaged while living in your community? During the Dream phase you envision what might be. When the best of what is has been identified and is valued, the mind begins to search beyond, to imagine new possibilities. Imagining involves "passionate thinking", allowing yourself to be inspired by what you see. It means creating a positive image of a desired future. For example, what small outreach project would make a big difference on your block? In the Design phase you engage in dialogue, discussing and sharing discoveries and possibilities. Through dialogue, individual vision becomes shared vision. And finally in the Deliver phase you create the future through experimentation, innovation and action. Because ideals are grounded in realities, there is confidence to make things happen.

This inquiry process cannot be done in the traditional researcher-subject methodology. To be effective it must begin with appreciation. The primary task is to describe and explain those exceptional moments, which give energy to the organization and activate members' competencies and energies. The inquiry must be applicable. The study should lead to the creation of knowledge that can be used, applied, and validated in action. It must be provocative. An organization is capable of becoming more than it is at any given moment, and of learning how to determine its own future. Being provocative makes space for the organization to move. Finally the inquiry process must be collaborative. This assumes an inseparable relationship between the process of inquiry and its content.

An AI is best done within an intact group or organization. The more members of the organization that participate in the process the better the results will be. Usually a steering committee creates the appreciative questions. This is a critical point in the process. The questions will determine the answers. Therefore the questions must be well thought out and directly focused on what the organization wants to know, not what it wants to avoid or do. If good leadership is the focus, the questions should be about positive experiences of leadership by people in the organization. If the working in teams is the focus, the questions should draw out members best experiences of working in teams. If cross gender relationships are the focus, the questions should prompt people to talk about their best experience of working with a person of the opposite gender. Once the questions have been completed to the extent possible everyone in the organization should be interviewed. Ideally everyone would be interviewed and everyone would do an interview. There are usually five to seven questions in a typical AI interview. Each interview takes about 45 minutes to one hour. Interviewers should be trained if possible. Interviewers who can take on the inquisitiveness of a typical five year old do the best AI interviews. Interviewers should take good notes or audiotape the interview so it can be transcribed. Once all the interviews have been completed the AI steering committee gathers the data and does an initial analysis. They are looking for themes that can be illuminated by direct quotes and stories from the interviews.

The themes are then converted into provocative propositions about the group, organization or community. These propositions are always stated in the present tense i.e. "Ashtabula County is a place where people value the open spaces around them and support the development of a park system to insure their access to those spaces. Ashtabula County residents value the sense of place, the historical character of the architecture in each community is an integral part of this and development addresses this issue." (The Citizens of Ashtabula County, 1999). As many propositions can be created as there are themes discovered in the data from the interviews.

In the next phase group, organization or community members select propositions that excite or inspire them and collaborate on projects that create even more of the life giving forces, factors, practices and structures. During this phase experimentation and improvisation are the rules of the day. Members are making the road by walking it and must continue to ask these important questions. What in this particular context or setting is making organizing possible? What are the possibilities, expressed or latent, that provide opportunities for more effective forms of organizing? What is giving life to this group, organization, community or society? How to make more of that happen? Asking these questions will not only help the members stay on course, it will inspire them to continue their work and start the AI process all over again. The ultimate result is a collective image of expanding possibility that leads the group, organization or community to continuous renewal.

References

- Cooperrider, D. L.; Sorensen, P. F.; Whitney, D.; and Yaeger, T. F. (Eds.) 2000. Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change. Champaign, IL : Stipes Publishing L.L.C.
- Darwin, C. (1936). The origin of species by means of natural selection. New York: The Modern Library.
- Giddens, A. (1984). The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration. Cambridge: [Cambridgeshire]: Polity Press.
- Powell, W. W. & DiMaggio, P. J. (Eds.) (1991). The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Reason, P. (Ed.) (1994). Participation in human inquiry. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Regan, H. B. & Brooks, G. H. (1995). Out of Women's Experience: creating relational leadership. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.