

Leadership Development as Reflexive Practice

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## ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** Leadership development, Complex responsive process of relating, Leadership coaching, Reification, The uncanny, Struggle for recognition, Time, Involvement and detachment, Theoretical knowledge, Knowledge in action, Reflection, Reflexivity, Sensemaking, Making sense, Causality, Practice.

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This thesis examines Leadership Development in both a corporate setting and an expedition-based setting. The assumptions that are the foundations of current Leadership Development originate, and are informed by, aspects of the natural sciences. These methods are critiqued in terms of usability and applicability in the context of human relating. An alternative approach is investigated based on nonlinear causality and the complex responsive process of relating using the work of Stacey (2003, 2007, 2010), Stacey and Griffin (2005), Stacey et al. (2000). What is explored is the Leader as expert and the ability through communication, decision making, and planning to create certainty. What is problematized is the fantasy that this creates in ongoing day-to-day interactions.

The work explores interactions between a leadership consultant/coach and clients in varied domains: the role of the practitioner in the delivery and creation of theory, models, best practices and standard operating procedures; and the reflections of both the practitioner and clients that what is emerging cannot be foreseen. This leads to a further exploration cycle of the human experience in organizations and how reification, the uncanny, and the struggle for recognition might offer other ways of making sense of the experience.

The work examines the role of the consultant/teacher and the client/student and the emergence of knowledge. It further investigates the relationship of time and causality and how this is connected to theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action. This leads to a further connection of thinking, reflecting and reflexivity and what this means as practice for leadership development.

Using the context of leadership coaching for management teams and connecting the reflexive aspect of knowledge, what is argued is that sensemaking as developed by Weick (1995, 2001, 2009), Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) is not a sufficient practice to

explain and create best practices, standard operating procedures, models, and theories. What is also necessary, and is identified as sensemaking and connected to Elias (1987) work, is our own involvement and detachment as we abstract to understand what is happening in the moment between human agents. It is argued that paying attention to these aspects of ongoing human relating offer the possibility of thicker and a more contextualized understanding of the emergent unpredictable outcomes that leaders deal with every day.

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## **SUMMARY OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AAR: After Action Review

CL: Course leader

DOD: Department of Defense

EPA: Environmental Protection Agency

FOO: Family of Origin

FIG: Family in Group

IRPG: Incident Response Pocket Guide

LIOS: Leadership Institute of Seattle

LOD: Leader of the day

MCS: Mission Centered Solutions

NALE: Naval Academy Leadership Expedition

NOLS: National Outdoor Leadership School

NOLS Pro: National Outdoor Leadership Professional Training

NRG: NRG Energy

NWCG: National Wildfire Coordinating Group

OSHA: Occupational Safety and Health Administration

PDA: Personal Digital Assistant

PLE: Positive Learning Environment

SES: Senior Executive Service (top 3 tiers of the US Civil Service)

SEALs: Sea, Air and Land Teams (Special Forces of the US Navy)

SOP: Standard Operating Procedure

USFS: United States Forest Service

RCA: Root Cause Analysis

4/7/1: NOLS Leadership model (4 roles, 7 skills, 1 signature style)

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AS REFLEXIVE PRACTICE

### **Introduction**

The context of this dissertation and my work engages me in different settings in the domain of leading. I run my own consultancy that connects me with a variety of clients; for example, a senior executive in a major utility company, the Department of Defense (DOD) Senior Executive Service (SES), and second year Wharton MBAs. My work as a member of the Senior Faculty at the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) engages me with NASA Astronauts, US Navy Officers and SEAL candidates, Interagency Wilderness Firefighters, and other clients leading in complex, emergent and dynamic wilderness travel. In this context I am teaching and making sense of leading, decision making and the functioning of teams in high-stress, high-consequence wilderness settings with my students/clients. I also serve as a Trustee on the Board of Saybrook University. This collective context is significant. Unlike someone who is working in only one setting, and their narrative has a continuity of that setting, I will look at narrative from distinct settings—each having a continuity of topic and illustrating micro aspects of what I want to make sense of in the domain of leadership development and coaching.

The themes that are explored emerge out of the narrative of the practice I was engaged in with clients, students, and colleagues. The day-to-day work/practice that these varied narratives describe is about leadership development and leadership coaching as part of that development.

### **The reader's experience**

In Project One I revisited a number of key writers who had influenced my work up to that point. Reviewing these writers and contextualizing them to what I was currently thinking about and reading led to a beginning critique and reflection on how I was making sense of my work in a different way. This leads to the emergence and exploration of what is the animating question and what do I wish to look at in regard to the daily practice you are engaged in. What I wanted to explore was leadership development and coaching; this became an iterative process. By iterative I mean the repetitive processes that human beings participate in where the end of one cycle is the beginning of the next, and small changes are embedded in each cycle and continue to amplify as the process continues.



In Project Two I looked at reification (Lukacs, 1923 / 1972, Honneth, 2008b, Elias, 1978), the ongoing struggle for recognition that is embedded in our day-to-day interactions (Honneth, 1995) and *The Uncanny* (Freud, 1919 / 2003), and how they might be related in our *sensemaking/making sense* of our experience. The distinction here is that sensemaking is a retrospective glance to understand what happened, while making sense is occurring as we are in the process. When we are making sense we understand how we are sensemaking while being understanding and attentive to our own iterative process. I also looked at aspects of my consulting/coaching practice through contrasting and critiquing the waterline model and contrasting it with complex responsive process. In addition, I reflected on comparative dimensions of a consulting practice (Bader, 1995) and what this may entail for my own practice.

In Project Three the additional themes were ideas around involvement and detachment Elias (1987) and the current literature on management and leadership—contrasting this with Elias’ thinking on involvement and detachment, and complex responsive processes. This leads to a further exploration of the living present, ideology and power, and method and practice. These final themes from Project Three were picked up in Project Four and explored further.

Themes that were explored in Project Four were the ideas of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1968, Weick, 2001, 1993), metis (Scott, 1999), phronesis (Flyvbjerg, 2001), cultural hegemony (Jones, 2006, Scott, 1990, Gramsci, 2011) and power (Gramsci, 2011, Faubion, 2000, Gramsci, 2000), sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007) and making sense (Elias, 1978, 1987, 1991, [1939] 2000, Mead, 1934). What I explore is how does knowledge emerge and, in the process of emergence, how is the experience functionalized between human beings as knowledge in action. It leads to a further exploration and distinction in regard to the process of *sensemaking and making sense* and the resulting impact on leadership development and coaching.

The synopsis goes on to describe a narrative methodology: why it is a valid method for what is being researched especially in relationship to social science research, and how it stands up to criticism in regard to objectivity, rigor and reliability.

The themes running through the four projects are identified and connected to method, theory and practice as they iterate at the same time through the research. I

present the themes and arguments emerging out of my four research projects and how these (themes and arguments) are connected to the development of my thinking and practice. This introduces what is driving my main arguments and conclusions. I then connect this to the contribution my research is making to this field of knowledge and professional practice. Reflexivity is an ongoing theme of both personal engagement in my research, practice and thinking as practitioner, and it is a key component of what I am arguing as a critical element of leadership development and coaching.

As I explore and critique my own role as a practitioner, what arises in the beginning is that my approach was based on assumptions of causality of certainty from the natural sciences that are efficient (if-then) and rational (free will, observer can choose). Both of these causalities have their use in certain context. What I posit is that the causality of uncertainty emerging from the work on chaos models, models of dissipative structures and complex adaptive systems, and, specifically, transformative causality might offer a thicker, contextual setting for examining the practice that both the client and practitioner are engaged in and the possibility of more novel approaches to leadership development. What this leads to is an exploration of the human experience in leadership development expeditions and leadership coaching as a leadership development process. What emerges, and I argue is critical to rethinking these development processes, is an examination of how we interact, our understanding of time and causality, and the emergence of knowledge and *sensemaking and making sense*.

### **Complex responsive process of relating as context for leadership development**

This sets the context both for the narrative nature of my dissertation and how I make sense of the movement of my thinking and practice. Complex responsive processes look at and take up three ways of thinking about the activity of human beings (Stacey, 2007). First is the work of Mead (1934) around communicative interactions. Experienced as a series of gestures and responses, they are seen as a single social action from which meaning emerges. The second part incorporates Elias' (1978, 1987, 1991) ideas from a sociological standpoint that all human interaction involves the change and movement of individual and group identity at the same time. The ongoing emergence and changing power relation, the iteration of inclusion and exclusion, and all of this arises out of choices human agents are making based on

ideology. (Mead also had similar ideas around the emergence of the self, the social, and ideology). The third part is taken up by an analogy from the complexity sciences (Prigogine, 1997) and the ongoing interactions that take place in organizations that exhibit self-organizing properties leading to macro or population-wide patterns to emerge, which are both unstable and stable at the same time.

## **Method**

The method I am using here is a personal narrative approach to organizational and management studies (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001, O'Leary and Chia, 2007, Cunliffe et al., 2004, Cunliffe, 2003, 2004, Weick, 1995, 2001, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007, Czarniawska, 1998, 2004) where I am one of the actors. In addition there is an ongoing iterative process that is embedded in each project and a progression of thought from project to project. Part of the method is to share the narrative and pursuant sensemaking with my learning group and faculty advisor; this is important because it offers an ongoing process of questioning and challenge. The reader will have their experience of seeing how my thinking and sensemaking evolved over the past three and half years. In addition, this requires the researcher to be both reflective and reflexive—terms that are, at times, used interchangeably.

The reflective part of the method arises in the thoughtful narrative of ongoing human interaction—taking experience seriously. It is this idea that Elias describes as involved detachment (Elias, 1987). Reflexive is sometimes taken up as a reflex or reaction (as with a muscle reacting to stimuli). Because the experience is defined as relating between self and others, the reflexive part of the method emerges in a) how the researcher takes up and reflects on how they make sense of their life history in relation to experience and how they reflect on it, and b) how the researcher locates their way of thinking among the wider thinking and history of human interactions while being able to make critical distinctions between different ways of thinking about human interactions (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) take up the ideas of Giddens (1987) that we are able to “turn back upon” and monitor our own actions. They take it a step further with its link to social science in that the knowledge that is being generated is injected back into the reality that is being described. I argue that this is also what Stacey and Griffin (2005) are getting at. Throughout this research, the thinking and knowledge are being injected back into the research, thus creating for the researcher a movement in thought that is impacting the

ongoing practice and method. The reflective/reflexive process highlights an aspect that deserves further attention: the subjectivity of the researcher engaged in examining their own work.

The ethics of the research method are acknowledged in detail in the Method section of Chapter Five. The participants in this research were made aware of the fact that I might be writing about my experiences as I worked with them. When I did write about those individuals the work was shared with them. Even if pseudonyms had been used someone familiar with the work and setting would be able to rename the actors.

In summary, the method employed in my research is a narrative methodology that takes experience seriously and looks at micro interactions that are taking place between the human agents in that narrative. The process of research is both reflective and reflexive and complex responsive processes are a way of thinking about the interactions that are taking place in the narrative.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Project 1, October 2009

#### Reflection on current thinking

##### Introduction

In this narrative I will start with an examination of how my Family of Origin and Culture of Origin have influenced my views (as a practitioner). I will then discuss my view of health and wellness, problem formation and dysfunction, the theory of change in individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. Since I experience myself as an entrepreneur, a manager, an expedition leader, an expedition member, a parent and an artist, I am able and willing to bring a little from each of these areas to my practice—recognizing, of course, that as my experience grows, my analysis of myself (as a practitioner) will evolve.

In addition I will look at how my thinking has been shaped and changed over time. I recognize that there have been both gradual changes and leap changes. A vivid example for me is how I experience myself as a 20 to 30 year old and my recollection of how I experienced myself. In that stage of my life I experience myself and approached life with certainty and a conviction about my own certainty. I was certain about anything that I was certain about. Today I am less certain about certainty and becoming more certain about uncertainty. This was starkly apparent in the recent work I did with a group of US Navy SEAL candidates who were very certain about their certainty. The question I raised for them in the daily debriefs was how are you dealing with uncertainty and their standard reply was that uncertainty is made certain by your own certainty.

I have started to recognize in this narrative that I am at a new threshold. Over the past six years after a leap change at The Leadership Institute of Seattle (LIOS) there were some gradual shifts in my thinking. I was looking more at what was emerging for my clients and students, and as I experienced myself and them it has become more than a “here and now” experience it has moved to the “living present” (Stacey, 2003). Stacey offers the following distinction and definition:

This is a linear view of time in which the present of the ‘here and now’ is a point separating the past from the future. The Living present, on the other hand, is a circular notion in which expectations forming in

the present about future affect the iteration of the past that is forming the expectation of the future. (p. 146)

My goal in this narrative is to connect my “here and now experience” to the “living present experiences” I am having and how that both informs me and changes how I am informed.

## **Discussion**

### **Family of Origin Experience and Culture of Origin Awareness**

In starting this narrative with Family of Origin experience and Culture of Origin awareness I am choosing to start at a mid-point. This is in keeping for me as my thinking has evolved from focusing on the “here and now” experience it has moved to the “living present”(Stacey, 2003).

The key situation circles around my reactivity. I would react to the feedback or projection from one of my siblings or a parent. I also have vivid memories of being reactive in the workplace. As I engaged in my Family of Origin work aided by the integrative group process and the academic work at LIOS, I found myself becoming more choice full, less reactive and curious about what was happening in the moment. I have also found that appropriate use of self-disclosure keeps me in the present and adds context for the person I am interacting with and for myself. A key aspect for me with my Family of Origin work was around personal authority as defined by Williamson (1991).

Williamson (1991) defined personal authority within the context of the family system. He had five key areas of personal authority he defined: (a) the ability to know and direct one’s own thoughts and opinions, and the freedom to choose to express them, (b) the ability to value one’s personal judgment consistently and to be able to make decisions and act on them, (c) the ability to take responsibility for all of one’s experiences, decisions and actions, and the resulting consequences, (d) the ability to freely choose to connect emotionally with others, and (e) the ability to relate to all human beings as peers.

I can look at my family of origin patterns and link them to my struggle with authority, especially if I perceive it as capricious. When this behavior happens, I do not identify the person engaged in this action as a peer and I question my judgment. As this pattern became more transparent to me, I was able to make cleaner choices. I

had two clients in a previous consultancy that would resort to what I considered capricious use of authority at various times during the project. The first couple of times they did this, I found myself wanting to act as a rescuer for their direct reports who were on the receiving end of this capricious behavior. As I reflected on this and was able to use immediacy, I was able to share with them the impact it was having on me and offer them the context that if I was impacted by their behavior, what was the experience of the other participants? These, in hindsight, were very powerful moments for me. The feedback I received from both clients was that they had not imagined it could have that impact and they were appreciative of my comments. I am also able to look at this now and see that it was this and more. The perspective of complex responsive process of relating and how that surfaces is the relationship to power and rank. The work of Foucault (1994) looks at power and Mindell (1995) looks at rank and how related to the work of Elias (1987) power and rank emerge in leading and their constraining and enabling nature impacts the relationships individuals are engaged in.

In looking back at my family system, I realized, that growing up with four sisters and parenting two daughters has made me very comfortable working with women. Due to this, I did not really focus on diversity or look at the fact that this work group, in this consultancy, made up of women and managed by women, was overseen by two men. Had I explored this it might have added additional layers of work for the client system and key learning's for me.

The major themes for me were about exercising control, balancing my personal authority, and wanting to be a group member. With the help of reflection, I was able to see the large patterns that were present for me. Sometimes I was successful in learning and creating new choices for myself. I also found myself, at times, being frustrated and questioning my judgment.

I can now look at this brief narrative above and add additional texture to my experience and reflections on authority and power. I was only experiencing them as constraining. It was not part of my discourse that power is both constraining and enabling as in Elias work ([1939] 2000) where he creates the distinction and connection of how we both constrain and enable others and ourselves in our relationships and how this is a source of power.

Having spent the time exploring my Family of Origin, I am now aware and able to experience the client in the same context—they also have a Family of Origin and might not be aware of how it is showing up for them in the “living present”. This gives me the opportunity, at the appropriate time, to share feelings and/or observations with the client. I am more curious and focused on helping the client look at the systemic issues. I am also able to look at power within in a client system with more discernment and nuance.

The one area of both support and opposition lies in the work of James and Argyris. In William James’s *Essays in Pragmatism*,(1948) he talks about how we live forwards and understand backwards and how truth emerges:

Truths emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth (the word is indifferent) and so on indefinitely. The ‘facts’ themselves meanwhile are not *true*. They simply *are*. Truth is the function of the beliefs that start and terminate among them. (p. 110)

I perceive the above quote as the precursor to the *Ladder of Inference* (Argyris, 1990). This combination of living forwards and understanding backwards; how truth emerges; how I move up the ladder of inference; can raise a warning flag as regards to my view of my own self-awareness. I proceed with caution mindful of the hubris that might arise out of my internal view of my self-awareness and alert that all of the above apply to client and practitioner. Both client and practitioner are constructing truth and inferring what the truth is for them. The awareness and effort is to remain curious and open to the different truths that manifest themselves as the work is done.

The living forwards and understanding backwards relates to my examination of my Family of Origin and Culture of Origin and ties into my awareness that: small behaviors, small decisions that are unhealthy go unchecked, they slowly compound. When as an agent of change I step into a system, one of the ways I am able to understand the client system is to be able to comprehend what has gone before and what they see as their future. The idea of looking backwards to move forward links fluently to the field of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2000) and how I (as an agent of change) advance the effort to bring forward the past so that we are aware of its impact on the future.



The connection I make today between Argyris and James is different as is my ongoing interpretation of both my Family of Origin and Culture of Origin. For both the reframing is in the context of the “living present”. What William James describes is circular processes while Argyris has more of a linear “here and now” approach. This is also true of how I had been thinking about my understanding of my Family of Origin and Culture of Origin work. There is a circularity and emergence to my exploration now, which is closer to Williamsons (1991) original description of how to approach this process.

### **View of Health and Wellness**

For the past seventeen years I have used, taught, and role-modeled the seven leadership principles in conjunction with four-seven-one (Gookin and Leach, 2004, NOLS, 2000).<sup>1</sup> I have combined both my work at the Leadership Institute of Seattle (LIOS) and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and reframed these principles into a hierarchy, which they did not have before.

In essence, my view of health starts at the individual level with self-awareness. To me self-awareness is the driver of all levels of health. Using the lens of self-awareness, the seven leadership principles would line up as follows:

With self-awareness, you can create a vision and action plan that creates an environment of good expedition behavior<sup>2</sup>. You are able to communicate this and, based on your competence, you make judgments and decisions within your tolerance for adversity that fulfills your vision. With role clarity and an awareness of your signature presence/style. (NOLS, 2000, Gookin and Leach, 2004)

My personal view of the significance of self-awareness is supported by the work of Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002); Crosby (1998); and Heifetz and Linsky (2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Seven Leadership Principles and four-seven-one: (1) Expedition Behavior (EB), (2) Competence, (3) Communication, (4) Judgment & Decision Making, (5) Tolerance for Adversity & Uncertainty, (6) Self-Awareness, and (7) Vision & Action- four-seven-one: (1) Four Leadership Roles (a) Designated Leadership, (b) Peer Leadership, (c) Self leadership, (d) Active Followership, (2) Seven Leadership Principles/Skills- see above, (3) Signature Style: (a) How you deal with leadership, (b)How you make decisions, (c)How you explore conflict- Know your role, understand the skills you need and be aware of your personal style.

<sup>2</sup> Expedition behavior is how you choose to interact with other team members, while also supporting the mission and goals, participating in hard work, play, reflection and self-care.- translation workplace behavior

The self-awareness that exists at the individual level needs to be able to be translated to the group, organization, or community (system). It is through this process that health and wellness can migrate from the micro to the macro level. I will return to this point at the end of my discussion of individual health.

The work of Goleman (2002, 1998) and Crosby (1998) speaks directly to the idea of self-awareness and health—both at the individual and group level. They also link the quality and level of communication that takes place to reach self-awareness. The idea being that not only are you communicating ideas, but you are also checking in with the receivers (listeners) to make sure they have understood your intent in the communication. In your message delivery you are self-aware enough to perceive any personal lack of awareness in specific cultural areas.

Furthermore, the ability to be self-aware enhances our other leadership principles: competence, judgment, decision-making and tolerance for adversity and uncertainty. The link I see here is the Johari window (Jones and Pfeiffer, 1973). If an individual or a group is not doing the work that is necessary to enlarge the known window area, they will be dealing with events emerging from their blind spot area of that window. This increased level of awareness allows the individual to accurately self-assess their personal abilities as they relate to the system as a whole. I am also able to see this now with less certainty and rigidity especially in the context of the complex responsive process of relating (Shaw, 2002, Stacey, 2003). What I have been aware of recently is the ongoing emergence of how we relate especially in the domain of language and our ability to improvise in the “living present”.

The works of Heifetz and Linsky (1994, 2002) speak directly to one’s ability to look at the situation and remain curious and empathetic. The whole idea of building systemic capacity is the ability to be compassionate, to look at the other’s point of view (Rogers, 1961, Carkhuff, 1972), to be able, at both the individual and group level, to be comfortable with ambiguity and paradox (Smith and Berg, 1988). In addition, the individual level of self-differentiation also enhances this point. I think this is critical, especially when faced with adversity and uncertainty.

Judgment and decision-making are linked to a tolerance for adversity and uncertainty. The individual requires an ability to acknowledge their own experience and to continue to stay connected while maintaining their boundaries. This knowledge will also lead to a greater ability to be curious about others, to receive information and

be open to the possibilities that this information might elicit. All of the above qualities enable an individual to gather the information that is present in the system so that they can make decisions, especially when the outcome is uncertain. In my view, individual health is inexorably linked to the health of the group, organization, and community he or she belongs to and vice versa.

I look for a balance between both work process and human interaction when observing how a work group or team functions. It is the next step to health and wellness. In the work process area I look to the waterline model based on the work of Harrison, Taylor and Short (Harrison, 1970) and the group effectiveness model (Schwarz, 2002). A current example of this is the Waterline Model by Harrison (1970), he developed a model that looked at the different levels at which you could intervene in a system for change. This was further developed by Scherer and Short (2001) to look at group tasks vis-à-vis group maintenance.

The model looked at the tasks above the “waterline” and the maintenance required by group members to complete those tasks; the maintenance effort is below the waterline. The task aspect of the Waterline Model looks at what needs to be done to complete the goals or achieve the designated outcomes. The maintenance aspect includes how the group members feel toward each other and the effect of completing the task itself. If a group is not functioning well due to maintenance there are four descending levels where one can intervene. The deeper you descend, the higher the emotional and time investment.

The first intervening level is Structure, which examines clarity of goals and roles, decision-making authority in reaching goals and effective role organization. The second level is Group. This looks at team effectiveness, participation, influence, learning interactions, conflict resolution, group membership and interaction patterns. The third is the Inter-personal level showing how individuals communicate with each other and how they respond to conflict one on one. The fourth level is the Intra-personal. This looks at the individual’s experience in the process of working together and how effective they are at learning from the experience. In the past the way I would work with and teach this model was linear and mechanistic. For instance if the problem was at the interpersonal level I would teach and work with clients to move the issue back to structure and deal with it at that level. Today I am looking at how

each level is acting upon and informing the emergence in the other areas of this particular model. The application is more circular, less certain.

In my continued exploration of this I am looking at the patterns of mutually constructed process of communicative interaction, requiring participants in the process to be engaged in an authentic, improvisational ongoing relationship in the “living present”(Stacey, 2003) and the ongoing aspect of constraint and enabling behavior that occur in relationship, as explored by Elias (1987). In including these views and with the realization that my clients and I are in this ongoing emergent communicative interaction that is constraining and enabling our relationship, the model itself becomes more dynamic, more responsive. I am actually quite fond of this model and I am excited by the possibility of applying and experiencing differently in my practice.

In looking at the human interaction of teams, the reality I search for is how (and when) individuals on a team function not only as individuals but also as members of a group or team (French and Bell, 1999, Schein, 1999). This idea of being a cooperative member is the component that elevates the work process from good to outstanding. To shine a light on this structure, I rely on *The Characteristics of an Effective Team* as created by Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto (French and Bell, 1999):

Clear Purpose—defined and accepted vision, mission, goal or task, and  
an action plan

Informality—informal, comfortable, relaxed

Participation—much discussion with everyone encouraged to  
participate

Listening—use of effective listening techniques such as questioning,  
paraphrasing, and summarizing

Civilized disagreement—team is comfortable with disagreement; does  
not avoid, smooth over, or suppress conflict

Consensus decision making—substantial agreement through thorough  
discussion, avoidance of voting

Open communication—feelings seen as legitimate, few hidden agendas

Clear work and role assignments—clear expectations and work evenly  
divided

Shared leadership—in addition to a formal leader, everyone shares in effective leadership behaviors

External relations—the team pays attention to developing outside relationships, resources, and credibility

Style diversity—team has broad spectrum of group process and task skills

Self-assessment—periodic examination of how well the team is functioning. (p.157)

I find that this list of characteristics helps me to see the framework linking the individual to the group or organization. The goal for both groups and organizations is that they have a clear purpose—vision, mission, values, goals, and results (Collins and Porras, 1997)—which can help them create a healthy and competent environment.

The next area that I find critical is communication that allows for individual diversity, encourages participation, and tolerates disagreement to be present so that team members are comfortable with it. From a structural standpoint I want to be able to understand work and role assignments with clarity. Do the individuals and the groups have a clear understanding of roles and work assignments? Do they all have clear expectations and consequences for not meeting those expectations?

The interdependence of the group is reflected in shared leadership and consensus decision making. There is ongoing creative tension that exists in individuals, as they become group members. The leadership manifests itself at the formal leader level and in effective individual leadership behaviors. It is being able to find the correct balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group; and it will vary depending on what stage of development the group is in.

Finally, both at the group and organization level, what are their external relations? How does a work group interface with another work group? Are they able to be as accepting of the diversity that contact might bring? Are they able to disagree? I want to see the same healthy attributes at the edges of the group where the contact is made. This also applies to organizations that have external stakeholders such as: stockholders, purveyors, and customers. How do they interface with these groups and do the same standards apply? At the organizational level, do the mission, vision,

values, goals, and outcomes line up with what is actually occurring in the organization?

To ascertain health and wellness, I would want to know (and would need to know) that starting with the individuals there is consistency at all levels—both internal and external.

### **Theory of Problem Formation**

I am a naturally curious and gregarious person. Based on my work experience and the knowledge I have acquired from my Master's work at the Leadership Institute of Seattle (LIOS), I have developed strong beliefs about what defines *healthy*. I am able to make people feel comfortable and get them to reveal to me what they are thinking and feeling about their work. I use all of these characteristics to benefit both the client and myself. The lack of wellbeing and competence is the antithesis of my view of health.

During the process, I ask a large number of questions. I want to know what their experience is, what is working, what is not working, what they would be doing if they lived in a perfect world. I want to be able to understand from the person actually doing the job what is going on with them. The dialogue starts to create a picture for me and, with this in hand; a possible direction for my intervention emerges.

I see problem formation as a series of small incremental steps. Over the course of time a small series of events erodes the health and competency of the individual and/or system. I base this view on the work reported in *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* (Williamson, 2007). The history of each accident is traced back through the expedition; it becomes clear that the accident occurred because of a series of small decisions. I think that the same results occur in groups and organizations. Small behaviors and little decisions that are unhealthy can go unchecked and slowly they compound. As a change agent, I need to be able to sift back through these small events as I develop my picture of the client system.

As I examine the alignment of the organization, I am attentive to how a lack of health has been created by a series of small incremental events. Is there alignment, both internally and externally, between the vision, mission, values, goals, and outcomes? The overlays I use to keep on track during this process are Harrison's waterline model, Schwarz's group effectiveness model and Connor's sponsor/agent/target/advocate (SATA) sponsorship model. I find Connor's model

particularly useful in my ongoing work, both as a way of keeping myself centered and clear in a work system, and as the genesis for one of the intervention steps with a recent client system. I will elaborate on this in the next section (Theory of Change).

In closing, I have especially enjoyed and have applied the work of R.A. Heifetz (Heifetz, 1994, Heifetz and Linsky, 2002); his concepts of both adaptive and technical change in groups resonate with me in the area of problem formation and how organizations have a tendency to opt for the technical fix. This has heightened my awareness and created for me a new area of questioning to pursue with my clients.

I would like to connect Heifetz work with some of my current reading and thoughts through a brief narrative of working with a client's group.

My client group is the largest coal-fired electric plant on the east coast of the United States. My initial involvement was in coaching the manager of the plant. In the process of coaching, and while developing his action plan, one of the major concerns that emerged for him was how to create a plan to retrofit the plant (expected cost = \$600 million US) and, at the same time, meet all the new environmental standards.

The question I raised was, "No matter what kind of plan emerges for the retrofitting of the plant, what do you think is the foremost factor that will make this process successful?" After a long silence, he answered, "Making sure all 170 people are involved in creating and executing the plan—that's what will make it successful." It seemed to be both a reasonable and a daunting threshold for success. We used the rest of the coaching session to brainstorm what this process might look like, who needed to be involved in the beginning planning, and what role my client wanted to take on during this process.

My client's background played a critical part in this process. His professional career was formed by his service in the US Navy, his working and managing atomic power plants and his formal education (engineering and business degrees). He prided himself on making decisions and being a "straight shooter." These self-perceptions were both an asset and an area of growth in the feedback he received from his 360, (The Leadership Circle 360). As a result, our work together focused on two major areas: a) coaching him to be able to manage himself better in the system while designating to others (especially developing a greater capacity to allow others to be responsible for decisions that he felt he should be accountable for), and b) increasing

overall functioning in content and process (Bader, 1995). The goal would be to expand our work to involve the planning process or the plant retrofit.

The group that convened to start the discussion of the plan was composed of twenty people: the plant manager, his six direct reports, the president of the union and twelve employees covering all the departments in the plant. My role was to facilitate the group meeting and to engage in live coaching for my client, as needed. From the very start of the meeting, the participants wanted to move to task immediately—get the plan written and be done with it. I allowed that first meeting to wander on its own for a little bit, then I interrupted to make the following observation: “I imagine that in this room at this time there is all the engineering know-how needed to address all these issues and yet, you are stumped on resolving these engineering matters. My hunch is that it has nothing to do with your engineering acumen rather, I think, it has to do with the conversations you are not having.”

This was followed by a rather long silence. I experienced my anxiety rising. My client spoke up and asked what those conversations would look like. I turned to the flip chart that I had been writing on and noticed the words that described some of the technical engineering issues that keep on arising: 1) Opacity (level of soot and particulate matters in the exhaust), 2) Lubrication (issues with turbines and pumps), 3) Chemical mix or chemistry (chemistry that induces greater particulate precipitation or binding and appropriate treatment of water waste). In that moment “the living present” I chose to create a verbal gesture out of their own technical language: “I think that the conversations you are having have a level of opacity, are lacking in lubrication and the chemistry needs some work”.

This broke the silence and started the conversation. We spent the next two days breaking into four teams and addressing what the process to develop the plan needed to look like. At the end of the two days the critical outcome was a process for allowing *self-organizing, cross-functional teams* to emerge to address the critical issues that are impacting plant performance from reaching the threshold to warrant investment. And based on this conclusion a cross-functional group self-organized to develop this needed process.

Let’s look at the verbal gesture (Mead, 1934) I made and the response it elicited. Based on Mead’s view by making a certain choice in the words my gesture was one of challenge and invitation to my clients. I needed to be open to whatever



emerged in their response. I had to be ready to improvise and be spontaneous at the same time. I found myself in “the living present” more emergent, less constrained by the anxiety of uncertainty and in some way balanced by the enabling aspects of uncertainty. As I was present with the enabling and constraining aspects of uncertainty and its emergence I connected both wonder and anxiety as energy producers.

This experience (of anxiety and wonder as energy producers) comes together in my mind as a result of the very nature of these two emotional fields. I experience wonder as an enabling emotion and anxiety as a constraining emotion. When the two are coupled it is similar to the force field of two strong magnets being pushed together. The force necessary to keep the two magnets in alignment produces an energy field. Similarly, for me, in experiencing these two emotional fields at the same time a level of energy is generated that allows me to be focused, to pay attention to what is emerging, and to act. Athletes will refer to this as being in the zone.

During the next month, the same group met two more times for two individual days. The same process of breaking into teams was repeated as the procedure for organizing teams was refined. The critical aspect was for all of them to spend time in conversation and to witness the diversity that came from the different answers, solutions and approaches put forth from each team. One of my goals was to illustrate to them that they needed to slow down to speed up. The first self-organized, cross-functional team is dealing with all of the housekeeping issues throughout the plant.

As I am reflective and reflexive about this experience I am able to see the transitions I have been through and how I engage in my work. I know that my preferred modality in the past was to problem solve, or in the words of Heifetz and Linsky (2002) I would move to a technical solution rather than spending time at developing an adaptive solution. This particular need of mine to focus on problem solving and/or offering the client a concrete technical fix was directly linked to my own anxiety and narrative around competency. I equated level of competency directly with what the client and I could apply metrics to. As I incorporated the work of Heifetz and Linsky into my approach I started to see the long-term value of allocating time to more of the process aspects, which allowed for an adaptive solution to emerge. What has moved me in the direction of exploring this even further is Patricia Shaw’s work (2002) on changing conversations in the work place:

Above all I want to propose that if organizing is understood essentially as a conversational process, an inescapably self-organizing process of participating in the spontaneous emergence of continuity and change, then we need a rather different way of thinking about any kind of organizational practice that focuses on change. (p. 11)

And: "... rather it explores how we might make sense of our experience of working with continuity and change day by day." (p. 11)

It is this aspect of conversing as organizing, organizing as conversing (Shaw, 2002) that emerged in the above work. It was over the various days of the offsite conversations that they were able to be present with what emerged and from that emergence create a structure that created both continuity and change as they moved forward to resolve their technical issues.

I am also aware as a narrate this and think about the process that I was involved in how in the living present I experience myself with less anxiety and willing to be both structured and unstructured, and as the conversation emerges to be aware of the risk and to spontaneously improvise.

### **Theory of Change**

Change impacts each participant and I look at change as an ongoing process for all of the people involved (sponsor, agent, target and advocate). I know from having been in each role myself (sponsor, agent, target and advocate) that change is difficult and I have a true sense of compassion and empathy for each player in the change process. Recognizing that many times clients are looking for a quick technical fix, I see that they are not focused on the adaptive change or changes that might be needed in their organization. Their language and their actions have to be brought into alignment if they are interested in change.

In looking at change and why a client might want change, I need to understand what is driving this process. What is important? What is the issue that the client is grappling with? As I work with the client at identifying the issues, I am also looking at ways to work with the client to achieve small incremental victories in the journey toward change (Kotter, 1996). An added tool I employ and find useful in the change process is behavior modeling (French and Bell, 1999). Two other areas I monitor are (1) how the change process evolves and (2) what starts happening when resistance surfaces.

In looking at the process of change, I have worked at assembling my own methods built on the foundation of (Conner, 1992, French and Bell, 1999, Heifetz, 1994, Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, Kotter, 1996, Schein, 1999). There is the need for clear and continued communication of what the future state will be; the reasons that this is important to the future health of the organization; a clear reward system that focuses on the change effort; the small incremental wins; and the ability to acknowledge and work on the need to increase employee capacity during and after the change.

Resistance will inevitably surface and I look to (Block, 2000, French and Bell, 1999, Schein, 1999, Schwarz, 2002) for guidance. In a recent project this resistance showed up in the form of a lack of clarity both in my immediate role and my future role. For the client there was poor role clarity in the present structure (and not much thought had been given to future roles). In this case I chose to use my re-contracting process as a view into the need for role clarity for the client. I was able to share with the client how this course of action facilitated my work and why this was important to me. This discourse helped the client to begin to talk about what their present roles are and what the future roles might be. As the change agent, I was aware of my own lack of role clarity and how this was also present in the client system.

My work as a change agent is the ability to engage the client with their issue(s) at the appropriate time being mindful and aware of my own judgments and any sense of urgency. I find this collaboration to be an ongoing dance where I am, to a certain extent, leading and where I have, at the same time, the option to pick up or slow down the tempo at just the right moment. However, there is always the possibility that even if I think the issue is ready to be raised and change embraced, if the client's capacity has not moved along at a matching pace of development, some type of resistance will surface.

As a change agent I bring compassion, empathy and patience to the change process. Because I have been on the client side, I know difficulties can erupt during the process and I watch for them. Another dynamic is my ability to introduce humor when appropriate and encourage bit of fun when I think a little lightness is suitable.

The threads that are present in my view of change above in many ways link directly with how my evolving view is emerging. Both from the narrative of my work with the US Navy and my coal fired electric plant client, what is salient is the tension

for me between skills based and process based work. I have been consistently focused on improving skills and I am realizing that in the acquisition of skills I have been engaged in the process of communicative interaction. That as Mead (1934) describes it, I am engaged in a social interaction of generalizing and particularizing that allows an ongoing emergence of change.

In looking at my past narrative of change what I realize is how engineered and model driven it is and how, based on where I have been and what my view of the world is, this makes sense to me. What I am also realizing in this process is how, in the ongoing struggle of wanting to be competent and in my desire to be hired by clients, I have relied on this knowledge base, the models I have chosen and the well-engineered layout for change. As I re-experience this layout and models, I am coming to the realization that when they are allowed to emerge and I am willing to improvise with the client, there is a more generative experience. Clients are not merely getting brief insights, but rather there is the opportunity for the client/student to engage in a change of their practice.

Just recently I did a follow up with the Carmelite Order, specifically with their Novitiate and senior leadership. What was present for the two days was the 800-year conversation of their order and what was happening now and how that was going to impact their future. The structure was one-and-a-half-hour slots. The topics of the conversations were brought forward by the group. My work was to stay with them in the conversation and improvise. I normally would have some content or model to drive the conversation. I am dancing with both the emergent nature of my work and the structures I have used in the past.

In closing this section I want to briefly touch on what I mean by a system, or work system. The way I have been looking at this and at some level continue to look at this is a work structure that has been assembled to produce a series of goods and/or services. What I am realizing is that it is more complex and amorphous when I start to see this as a series of individuals in an ongoing complex responsive process of relating; and how their constraining and enabling relationships with each other impacts and changes how people are organized and how work is done. What I will need to continue to look at is this inter-relation of a linear conceptual work system and the patterning phenomenon of human relations in organizations?

## **Conclusion**

As a change agent, I experience creative tension in my struggle between process and expert consultant. I must also create a balance between my desire to get things done and leadership. I have looked at my methods and found reassurance in focusing on the principles of the four-fold way (Arrien, 1993):

1. Show up, or choose to be present
2. Pay attention to what has heart and meaning
3. Tell the truth without blame or judgment
4. Be open to outcome, not attached to outcome

The principle I have struggled with is being open to outcome. I think this is due to my background as a manager and business owner. I am aware of this attitude and capable of discerning when it is appropriate not to be attached to outcome in the process of change.

My pattern of work reveals that when it comes to working with clients, I draw on: curiosity, an appreciative eye, small incremental changes, picking up on language and actions that tell me I am resonating with them, compassion and gentleness when they reach that moment of vulnerability. Finally, I work in partnership with them to increase their capacity to do more of the actual change work themselves.

In summary, self-awareness, clear sponsorship, the client's desire for and the level of urgency surrounding the work (that they think they need) can lead to an open and productive learning system. I am an open and curious learner. These are the broad-brush strokes. The fine detail work comes after examining the client's group internally, studying academic resources and continually honing my Practitioner's toolbox.

The above conclusion and summary accurately reflect how I saw and have been approaching my work. Currently I am amazed and amused as I pay attention to conversations with students and clients and how we are changing in the moment as we are engaged in this social act and how the act itself changes us. I find myself gradually re-interpreting models I have used in the past from a linear approach to a more circular, dynamic and emergent view. A current example of this is the Waterline Model by Harrison (1970), he developed a model that looked at the different levels at which you could intervene in a system for change. This was further developed by

Scherer and Short (2001) to look at group tasks vis-à-vis group maintenance, which I elaborated on previously in my narrative.

I am back where I started in the Introduction here in the “living present” with the circularity and emergence that are my present and past re-informing and reforming themselves as I write this narrative. I started with a narrative that was strongly skill based and, as I have developed this narrative process, become a sustaining and reinforcing partner for the skill aspect of this narrative. It is the partnering between skill and process and the constraining and enabling relationship we have with power that I would like to explore in future projects.

In the next chapter I will take up the ideas around communication interactions as a patterning process. Taking up these patterns from the standpoint of myself as the consultant/facilitator/teacher along with my clients’ experiences of these patterns I will also explore how we might constrain/enable the possibility of more satisfying outcomes or not.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Project 2, May 2010

#### Communicative Interaction as patterning process

##### Introduction

A number of themes have arisen in my recent efforts with different populations or client groups. In my work with a number of these organizations, the training focuses on the middle management level as the executive teams have come to the decision that these particular groups need “fixing” through training in some way. The middle management group is disconnected from the networks of social interaction they are normally involved with in the day-to-day operating of their business group for a number of days for training or for a number of hours per week for coaching. The training or coaching experience is a standalone for the (middle manager) group who, upon completion of the training, then re-enter the organization with a possible change in language, decision-making, and conversation. I would characterize it as a dyadic learning relationship in the traditional sense of the sender/receiver interaction of information or techniques, which needs to be imparted by the sender and taken up by the receiver and then applied to their situation. I will explore this further later in this narrative.

What I want to examine is:

- The constraints of engaging in a prescribed way—the emergence of what can and cannot be said, cult values and their translation in to functionalized values (Mead, 1934)
- The communicative process when they return to work and its importance to the construction of ordinary everyday reality
- The facilitation of fruitful new conversation—the new flowing exchange that recreates the constraining themes, norms and values of a group’s identity and *at the same time* allows for the emergence of difference and innovative change.

How might the present organizational stasis, solidified and strengthened by the on-going iteration of the existing organizational values and conversation, be challenged?

In narrating my experience I have started to make the following connections that have raised issues for me concerning both the consultant and the clients—there is a quality

to the unknown and a value to entering into that unknowing relationship. This unknowing relationship is with oneself (in the consultant-client relationship and within the client as they return to their day-to-day work setting). In this context and in my narrative, I will attempt to make sense of this while examining the bullet points (listed above).

My current work is in Jewett, TX working with the management team of the largest coal-fired power plant in Texas with a capacity production of 1900 megawatts. The plant sits on a major lignite, open-pit coalfield offering a first-hand view of both the scarring and environmental impact of energy production in the United States and what is being done to mitigate the environmental impact of open-pit coal mining and burning lignite coal to produce energy. The work I have been hired to do here is to coach the general manager and, as needed, work with the management team. The patterning of conversations and how they then show up in the general manager's work with his team are also part of the coaching process. Additionally, there are the interactions that surface during the process between the general manager, the management team and myself (the coach/consultant).

One of the thematic comments from past work with clients in this context was: Now that I have experienced this process of coaching over three days, how do I take these experiences and a possible change in practice back to my work place? Secondary queries also came forward: How will I be accepted? How do I have a different conversation with my boss and is that even possible? What is the due diligence on the part of the facilitator /consultant to offer the participant context, caution, a way of moving to a different practice and the ability to manage the inherent associated risk?

I am moved to ask this last question as I reflect on the work of Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow (2002, 2009b) and the concern expressed about the nature of change adaptive challenges versus technical problems, as they define it. The simplified distinction they offer is that a technical problem has a clear problem definition: the solution is clear and the locus of work resides with the authority holder. A technical and adaptive issue has a clear problem definition, the solution requires learning and the locus of work resides with formal authority and stakeholders. Adaptive challenges, in order to be able to define the problem, require learning; the solution



also requires some form of learning and the locus of the work is with stakeholders. (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, Heifetz et al., 2009b) So for this particular group of stakeholders, there has been learning that has changed them and/or impacted them. And yet, the work world (they are returning to) has continued to emerge based on the interactions they interrupted to attend a particular training or workshop or coaching.

What I want to explore is connecting the person's experience to what Freud talks about in his essay *The Uncanny* (1919 / 2003) in that as these managers return to a work which is familiar to them, they also encounter something foreign in their work setting—something different that they might or might not be able to pinpoint—and it is this possible dissonance that concerns me as the consultant/coach. It is the possibility of it actually being unknown to them even though what appears to them are familiar day-to-day patterns. The connection I am exploring is the interplay of the familiar day-to-day patterns with the unknown. I will return to this theme later on as I explore reification, the concept of mutual recognition and the uncanny.

An area of further interest to me is the interplay of reification (Lukacs, 1923 / 1972, Honneth, 2008b, Elias, 1978), the ongoing struggle for mutual recognition (whether we are the designated leader or an active follower) and, finally, the uncanny nature of our relationships as we learn, change and our thought moves. How can the familiar become disturbingly unknown to us? What is interesting to me is how coaching, leadership training/development, and organizational development interventions are undertaken; what the in-tandem narratives and expectations concerning the professional organizational consultancy and coaching will look like; and how all of this shapes how we approach our work, which creates the dynamic of constraining and enabling and affects what we talk about and the way we talk. What I am experiencing as a number of premises in Leadership and Executive coaching and training is the question I struggle with. I would summarize them as a dyadic learning relationship in the traditional sense of the sender/receiver interaction of information or techniques, which needs to be imparted by the sender and taken up by the receiver and applied to their situation, and that this is based in a rationalist causality of certainty (Stacey, 2007, 2010). In my current way of making sense of my practice, I experience the learning as residing in the everyday interactions that are taking place in the organization and that as a coach/consultant I am immersing and abstracting in these

interactions with my clients as I try to make sense of what is happening in the living present. What I will attempt to do, as I investigate this, is to locate myself and my practice within it.

### **First Visit to NRG Limestone Plant, Jewett, TX.**

I previously coached two plant general managers for NRG Energy. This third iteration brings me to a large coal-fired electric plant in a little town in the middle of Texas called Jewett. Fran Sullivan, Vice President of North American operations, called and asked if I would be interested in coaching a certain individual. Based on my assent, the normal progression is that the coachee candidate is offered a slate of coaches who he/she interviews and then makes a selection. In this case, however, Fran decided that due to my previously successful work with two of his other general managers, he wanted me to coach this candidate. This is problematic because it removes choice from the coachee who is told that ‘Sam’ is the person who will be their coach. I pointed out this potential sticky predicament to Fran. His response was that he knew all the players and, in this case, the coachee’s lack of choice would not be a problem. I will reflect on this later in the narrative.

The next part of the conversation with Fran centered on setting up a face-to-face meeting with the participants: the human resources manager, the coachee, the coachee’s boss, Fran and me (coach/consultant). The goal of the meeting was to make sure we were all clear about roles, reporting and what is shared, and not shared, by me in my function as coach/consultant with others. The original conversation with Fran was in May 2009 and with the assistance of his administrative assistant I set to organizing the first meeting. I knew about Fran’s demanding schedule and I was expecting this issue to be an impediment to moving forward. My second, source-of-delay hurdle concerned the coachee, Gary Mechler. He had not been given a choice. Fran told Gary that he needed coaching to move to the next level and that a coach who had a strong track record with NRG had been selected for him. This sequence of events raises a number of issues for both the coach and the coachee that will need to be addressed in our beginning conversations. Furthermore, as this conversation with Fran and Gary was evolving, Fran informed us that he thought Gary’s boss, Don Poe, Vice President for Texas, should also be in the loop. Because of the pressures of Fran’s convoluted schedule and some foot-dragging reticence from Gary, my July

availability (a window between two NOLS NALE courses) slipped by. I then blocked out time before I left for a month of mountaineering in Italy, but we were again unable to coordinate schedules for a meeting that August. Ultimately, we settled on a date in late September with Fran attending by teleconference. The participants included Gary Mechler, Gary's boss Don Poe, Fran Sullivan (who is Don Poe's boss) and me. Due to Gary's father's sudden illness, we all agreed to reschedule the meeting to early October.

Amidst these changeable meeting arrangements, I thought it would be a good idea if Gary and I spent some time on the telephone. My objective was to address any concerns he had and to scrutinize if he was committed to the coaching process. We talked in late September. The conversation started off with the usual social chitchat and an update on his father's condition (he was still in the hospital with a serious coronary issue). The conversation moved to coaching. Gary indicated that he had some concerns despite Fran's indication that the coaching process was meant to help him move to the next level. I explained to Gary that I had no idea what 'the next level' was, what it looked like and what he would need to do to get there. I expressed to him that this topic should be broached and discussed in our meeting with Don and Fran in a couple of weeks. I indicated that the best way to spend our current time in conversation might be to explore what coaching was about, how our relationship as coach and coachee might play itself out and what confidentiality means in a coaching relationship.

I would characterize the tone of Gary's side of the conversation right from the beginning as distant, cautious, and somewhat circumspect; it was almost as if Gary was not sure he wanted to be in this conversation. He expressed some level of concern that I was not clear about what the next level was going to be for him. This topic initiated engagement between us and we began to explore that, in actuality, "the next level" was a nebulous, inspirational, managerial catch phrase that could mean anything. The conversation became more engaged as we explored the subjectivity of this nebulous assessment and the ways that Gary might be able to give it concreteness. As we dialogued back and forth, I was able to illustrate to him the nature of a coaching conversation and the level of work and exploration he was engaged in at that moment in the living present (Griffin, 2002, Stacey et al., 2000). This series of verbal

gestures (Mead, 1934) changed the tone and level of engagement on Gary's part. I will spend more time elaborating on the living present and verbal gestures as described by Mead in the reflections that follow.

It was an early morning in Houston when I started out on my two-and-a-half-hour drive north to Jewett, TX. I would be there for the next four days. During the drive I reflected on my role as a consultant and, in some ways, as an actor in a social play (Goffman, 1959). I was choiceful about my wardrobe knowing I would be distinct from how others dressed at the plant. As a consultant/actor entering the plant, I mulled over my part in this new emergent play called "Work/Limestone/NRG Energy" and considered who would participate in the performance with me. I would also experience the interplay between the familiar and the unknown. As I stepped into settings that were familiar in nature—offices and conference rooms—I knew I was familiar with what I needed to do. I would start coaching conversations that were familiar to me and yet, what was present was the unknown of how these individuals would respond to my verbal gestures and how I would react to these unknown phenomena. I will take this up later in the narrative around Freud's essay *The Uncanny*. (Freud, 1919 / 2003)

It was hurricane season in Texas and the day was stormy with low cloud cover, fog, and intermittent rain. I was not sure where I was going, but I followed the directions carefully. And then, in spite of the low clouds and fog, I suddenly saw it protruding out of the flatland. It was (and still is) a huge plant with two 550-foot stacks and two 950-megawatt generating turbine buildings. I arrived at the plant at 08:30; our meeting was scheduled for 09:00. I proceeded through security and Gary greeted me at the front door of the administration building. We had a few moments to check-in with each other on our way to the conference room where I met Don Poe for the first time. Don and I briefly conversed and then the phone rang and Fran was on the speakerphone—the meeting began.

Fran, as the sponsor of this coaching work, started the conversation and proceeded to explain why he thought Gary needed coaching and why he wanted me to coach Gary. The language Fran used was a series of idealized managerial sound bites—moving to the next level, empowering you to work on creating the future of Limestone here in Jewett, etc. Don Poe nodded his head in agreement as Fran

continued to talk. I waited for Gary to ask Fran to be more specific (which had been one of the topics of our initial telephone coaching conversation), but he did not jump in with questions or comments. Fran moved on and addressed me. He started talking about how I could help Gary get his hands around strategic planning, staged outage plans, and developing his team. When Fran finished his monologue, I first asked him if he had any specific requests pertaining to Gary's move to the next level, and if he did, were there clear conditions of satisfaction that needed to be met. There was a brief silence and then Fran asked Don Poe if he had any input. Neither of them proffered specifics, conditions or tasks to be completed. I then continued the conversation to clarify my role as a coach. The concept being that, in this situation, I was coaching Gary. Gary would be doing or not doing the work. I also spelled out my reporting role; I would work with Gary. If Fran and/or Don wanted a progress report, they would have to check with Gary. The 360 and other psychological testing results were for Gary's use and it was up to him to decide how he would share this information. It was also Gary's decision on how he chose (and if he chose) to share the action plan he developed.

The conversation continued and Fran and Don acknowledged their understanding of the coaching relationship. At this point I asked Gary if he had any concerns and he said that he did not. Next I met privately and individually with Fran, Don and Gary. The confidential questions I raised at that meeting with Fran and Don were: 1) Are you planning on firing this person? 2) Is there anything you have not told me? If either of these questions elicited new data unshared with Gary, I explained that we would then reconvene as a group and include this new information in our conversation. Neither of them had anything new or any unspoken concerns. My next meeting was with Gary.

The way I start the meeting with the coachee is to confirm that they still want me as a coach. Gary indicated that he would like to engage in the coaching process and was happy to continue working with me. The first thing I chose to do was to share with Gary the "speech acts" as used in the domain of coaching: understanding of the language that is being used and allows us to create distinctions that have the possibility of moving the conversation in a different direction. It is also inviting us to be more specific and deliberate about our language and what we are asking for and

really saying. I spent the rest of the day in conversation with Gary and following him around as he engaged in his daily work. I wanted to have a sense of this person in his day-to-day interactions with his immediate team and the personnel in the plant at large.

The next three days of this visit were spent interviewing Gary's direct reports and other key stakeholders at the plant, including the two heads of the local union, key supervisory staff (who reported to Gary's direct reports) and a number of individual contributors. What I want to point out at this juncture is how a relationship to coach, which I was hired for and interpreted by the client as dyadic, has now evolved into a series of local conversations with a variety of participants. I have no idea how these different interactions will evolve. Goals for the coaching relationship are emerging out of a series of micro interactions that are occurring with a cast of individuals who are constraining and enabling both the coach and coachee. As these goals emerge they are then interacted upon and change as they evolve. The coach in his work is both immersed with the coachee and their immediate team and abstracting so as to reflect and make sense of what is actually occurring.

### **Reflection on Four Days in Texas**

The first thing that dramatically came to mind was my desire to follow my script. In my early career as a consultant and coach, I was less meticulous—more laissez-faire. I did not move diligently through this process. Generally it all worked out in the end and there were no adverse consequences. Nevertheless, there was a circumstance when I relied on the sponsor to have the necessary conversations with the concerned parties. The sponsor did not, however, have those conversations. The work started and shortly thereafter one of the parties accused me of bad faith practices and a lack of integrity. To clear this situation up required various lengthy meetings and supplementary coaching. The experience was dramatic enough for me to make a personal declaration to myself to stick to my script process and that, in the future, I would not start work with a client group unless I had fulfilled this personal and professional commitment of due diligence.

I would like to take a moment here and reflect on my own practice. My thinking has been that in following the above script and (in my words) following my due diligence that in some way there was a level of certainty of the outcome—a stick

to my script guaranty. And, I believed, that if I practiced diligence, I would avoid the problems I had encountered previously. There is no accounting in this belief for the improvisation that is always present in the call and response of the verbal gesture. In reflecting on my own practice, I look at my script and remind myself to be attentive to the communicative process taking place in the “living present” which is different than the “here and now” (Stacey, 2003). Stacey offers the following distinction and definition:

This is a linear view of time in which the present of the ‘here and now’ is a point separating the past from the future. The Living present, on the other hand, is a circular notion in which expectations forming in the present about future affect the iteration of the past that is forming the expectation of the future. (p. 146)

The outcome will create its own pattern through the enabling and constraining nature of the verbal gestures that are made. This will be illustrated in the narrative below—Fran’s statement that Gary needs to move to the next level.

The experience I had in following, or I should say in attempting to follow, my script was a learning opportunity—possess a generalized script that needs to be particularized in the moment and in the context of the verbal gesture and response as described by Mead (1934). I will elaborate further on this aspect of language, the verbal gesture and response in conjunction with those speech acts introduced earlier.

Mead describes the interactions of human beings as a process of ongoing gestures and responses. The gestures are mainly verbal as are the responses. It is in this ongoing iteration that a relationship emerges and we engage in them with a sense of novelty, uniqueness and a level of improvisation that makes each interaction unique—unique to the extent that the exchange is always emergent and we are acting into the unknown because we have no real idea how the other will respond. I think with the exclusive nature of our verbal engagements especially in a work setting, that if we are able to create distinctions in the enabling and constraining nature of the verbal gesture, this might lead to greater clarity as to what we actually want or desire from the people we are interacting with in our day-to-day activities.

There is a quality to the daily iteration of interacting verbally that contains a matter-of-fact, taken-for-granted quality that the other person understands what we

are talking about. I would argue that this is not the case; rather there is a subtle subtext of interpretation that occurs. An example from the narrative above would be Fran's statement of the need for Gary *to move to the next level*. The subtext was that this "need" was understood by all present. In actuality the meaning was coded. When Fran was asked, "What do you mean by this?" or "How do you approach this issue with Gary?" there was no explanation as to what it meant and/or how we would know when (or if) this *next level* had even been achieved. Although there is a double bind present in choosing to do so, the very existence of this conundrum contributed to my decision to introduce the speech acts (Searle, 1969, Searle, 1999, Sieler, 2003).

The "speech act" is an end construct from a number of linguists and philosophers looking at language and postulating on what language does. John Austin saw speech as not merely as *saying* something; rather he saw it always being about *doing* something. He created three distinct forms of action 1) *Locution*—the vocal act of uttering audible words and the meaning of those words for the speaker, 2) *Illocution*—the idea that many words are themselves a form of action and that the speaking of them is the action itself, and 3) *Perlocution*—we speak to impact on other's listening, to produce effects and bring about changes in our circumstances (Austin, 1976). In creating these distinctions, Austin took up the aspect of illocutions, which focuses on the silent and invisible actions that accompany the words and body language embedded in communication, and led to his theory that actions are embedded within the words. Austin viewed the illocutionary acts as a series of "speech acts" and described a detailed classification of actions that are performed in the act of speaking. This was further developed by Searle (1969, 1999) who saw speech acts as a theory of action and a theory of meaning. Searle created five general distinctions that he thought were universal in the use of language: 1) we tell people how things are (assertions); 2) we try to get people to do things (requests); 3) we commit ourselves to do things (commitments, promises); 4) we express our feeling or attitudes, (assessments); and 5) we bring about change in the world through an utterance (declarations). These were further developed by Fernando Flores in his PhD (1982) dissertation and in his book *Trust* (2003) and serve today as a foundation for coaching and working with coachee's.



The thinking with the speech acts is that if they are understood and consciously used to structure our language, then we can actually bring a level of understanding and intentionality to our interactions. The issue I am having is that while they are useful, I wonder about the level of improvisation that should remain present in the conversation. If we are diligent in the use of the speech acts are we then self-censoring in some way? How are we constraining? Or does it in reality open up the conversation? My present thinking is that the speech acts offer the coachee a basic structure while asking the coachee to be reflective and reflexive about the language being used. I would argue from my own personal experience of using the speech acts that it invites the individual to a level of awareness of the impact and use of language. I believe that the early work of Austin and Searle is in keeping with Mead's thinking regarding the verbal gesture and response, and its improvisational nature. Based on further interpretation by Flores and in combination with how the coaching programs in the United States embrace it, what I experience and would argue is that through the use of the speech acts one can create certainty of outcome for both the coach and coachee. I would further argue that this sets up a relational underpinning of a rationalist causality of certainty (Stacey, 2007, 2010) between the coach and coachee. Based on my narrative and how I am taking coaching up with Gary and his team, and making sense of it, I am approaching this from a transformative causality of uncertainty (Stacey, 2007, 2010). I will take this up further and elaborate on these distinctions in relation to coaching, leading, decision making and leadership development in Chapter Three.

I would argue that the approach most current coaching authors like James Flaherty, *Coaching, Evoking Excellence in Others* (1999), Mary Beth O'Neil, *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart* (2000), Diane Stober and Anthony Grant, *Evidence Based Coaching* (2006), and Bruce Peltier, *The Psychology of Executive Coaching* (2010) to name a few, all are underpinned by a rationalist causality of certainty. Each has a slightly different approach/methodology and when you bring it down to its component parts it sees the leader as standing outside the group he/she is working with—the coach is working with the leader in a dyad. The coachee and coach develop goals, and then work towards those goals, and based on this the leader will change her behavior and the behavior of the team. In their

writings, this applies to both individual and team coaching. On the other hand if we approach coaching from a complex responsive processes viewpoint, we would experience the manager/leader as immersed in her team, the coach engaged in the coaching conversation is impacted by both the coachee and her relationships with her direct reports and the individuals she reports to, and the work emerges for the coach and coachee out of these ongoing interactions in the living present. Goals for the coaching are emerging out of a series of micro interactions that are occurring with a cast of individuals that are constraining and enabling both the coach and coachee. As these goals emerge they are then interacted upon and change as they evolve. The coach in his work is both immersed with the coachee and her immediate team and abstracting so as to reflect and make sense of what is occurring.

### **Return Visits to Jewett**

The following month, November, I returned to Jewett. (In between site visits Gary and I had two one-hour coaching conversations.) The purpose of my next on-site trip was to follow Gary for two days and spend a third day reviewing The Leadership Circle 360 and the MBTI (Briggs and Myers, 1998)/FIRO-B (Koenigs, 1998). The goal of following the coachee for a period of time is to get a sense of what their day-to-day work life looks like. What do his daily interactions look like? What is the cadence or pace of the day and how does the coachee change over an eight to ten-hour period? Does he start out fresh and energetic at the beginning of the day? Is he able to pace himself evenly throughout the day or are there periods when his energy dips and his patience with mundane tasks diminishes? Does the inflection of his voice change? Does he appear and or act more or less anxious as the day progresses? What this ‘real time’ observation gives to me, as the consultant/coach, is a more textured narrative than what I have collected from the 360 interviews.

In addition to my shadow study of the coachee’s workday, I have The Leadership Circle 360 (self-scoring/others scoring and comparing the results) and the MBTI/FIRO-B Leadership report (self-scoring). All of this combined allows for a robust conversation with the coachee. My experience has been that the interview narratives—along with the two instruments above—offer a clear pattern that can be openly discussed with the coachee. The elegance of this belt and suspenders process is that should the coachee dispute the results of one methodology, the consultant/coach

can demonstrate that similar patterns are also present in information gained by a different methodology. The general aspect and patterns of the narrative line up with both the self-scoring and the scoring-by-others reports.

The process of following Gary for the two days was generally uneventful. Gary's demeanor is quiet, reflective and caring. Most of the dialogue we engaged in revolved around my questioning his ability to accept the various day-to-day interactions and conversations without a great deal of reflection. What was occurring and/or happening in Gary's world made sense to him and, other than questioning technical data about the plant, he generally moved about his daily work schedule unperturbed by questions.

In my questioning Gary and reflecting about his work, what was I doing? What made me pose the particular questions I asked him? I think that the work of the consultant/coach in this role is to critique what is occurring in the day-to-day work environment—especially if it is taken for granted that *this is the way it is*. What was I choosing to do? It was my choice to critique Gary as he moved through his day so that he would have the opportunity to choose to look at his workday and his interactions in a reflective way. As I look back on this interaction, I think of Foucault's work and his riff in "So is it important to think?" (Faubion, 2000):

A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based.... Criticism consists in uncovering that thought and trying to change it: showing that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted. To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy. (p. 456)

It is this questioning of the day-to-day accepted practices that we are engaged in that Foucault is asking us to look at and then, in the everyday parlance of business, we will say "if it isn't broken don't fix it." In other words, at some level there is not a need or time to be reflective and reflexive about what we are doing in our daily interactions.

During this particular visit, Gary and I had an interaction about the employees' perception of NRG's commitment to Error Elimination/Practicing Perfection

Program. Gary shared with me that there had been an ongoing questioning by line employees and the union leadership concerning the level of commitment to this new approach. This was interesting to me because the plant was an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)-Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) Star plant. Below is a brief description of the program from the OSHA-VPP home page:

The Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) promote effective worksite-based safety and health. In the VPP, management, labor, and OSHA establish cooperative relationships at workplaces that have implemented a comprehensive safety and health management system. There are three ways to participate in VPP: Site-based, mobile workforce, and corporate. Approval into VPP is OSHA's official recognition of the outstanding efforts of employers and employees who have achieved exemplary occupational safety and health.  
(<http://www.osha.gov/dcsp/vpp/index.html>)

To achieve this status and maintain it requires a commitment from all levels. The process, Gary explained, took three years of diligent work to achieve certification. It is reviewed annually and can be revoked by OSHA. When we talked about the Error Elimination Program, Gary would refer to the commitment that had been demonstrated toward VPP and the amount that had been invested in training all 270 employees in the program.

Listening to Gary's narrative about commitment, I could understand how he was confused by the ongoing challenges/questions from employees and the union and I recognized his dilemma—no matter how much evidence he would summon to answer the query, the responding data/information was unsatisfactory to the questioner. Toward the end of the visit I asked Gary what compelled him to continuously answer the questions with the same data? He replied that he was offering to those people, who were questioning the commitment of NRG (and by implication Gary), the facts that they needed to look at in order to understand the existing level of commitment. I wondered out loud, "But what if that is not the answer?" He looked at me perplexed and asked me, "Well, if the facts aren't the answer—than what is?" I said, "What if the facts are not the answer? And what if you do not actually have the answer to satisfy the question? What if the answer to the question is a question?"

Gary thought for a few seconds and then explained that as the general manager of the plant he needed to provide the answers and/or find the answers if he did not readily have them at hand. My parting inspiration to Gary was that this is not necessarily true; it is merely an expectation that is projected onto us by others that we struggle to endure. There are all types of answers that can come from a myriad of sources.

During the month of November we had two one-hour coaching sessions. Our conversations revolved around the question of commitment to error elimination and how to institutionalize the program. I questioned Gary, “Who are the people involved in this program and want it to work the most?” At the end of our second coaching conversation Gary decided that it would be good to meet as a group to talk about how to institutionalize error elimination. I agreed to facilitate that conversation.

I returned to Jewett the second week of December. Gary and I had a coaching session in the morning and the facilitated meeting was scheduled for 14:00. At about 11:00 that morning Gary received an email concerning a contractor at another NRG plant who had just been killed in an accident. The email informed Gary that there would be a follow-up call at 15:00. I pointed out that the call would occur right in the middle of our upcoming facilitated meeting. His reply was fairly matter of fact saying that the participants will understand.

The meeting started at 14:00. Only half of the people Gary had asked to the conversation actually showed up. We proceeded with the facilitation. The conversation was active; participants were engaged. The general sense I was getting was that this was an important and valuable initiative to everybody in the room. Then at about 14:50 the tone began to shift as the managers left the room to participate in the conference call. There was a perceptible annoyance toward the people who left. The conversation moved to a level of pitter-patter I would describe as “gossip.” They wanted me to know that this happens often—a meeting or conversation is interrupted by something that is “more important” or “more urgent.” There was an aspect of me that wanted to hear more and to then, perhaps, knowingly digress from our original conversation. In some way I was actually thinking that this ongoing gossip is the genesis of the question “Is NRG committed?” and at the same time a possible part of the answer.

When they left the facilitation, I think that those managers who chose to go created a powerful gesture that they were both conscious of and unconscious of. The conscious gesture is in keeping with the dominant discourse around management, what management is engaged in and how this in many ways takes precedence over other events or interactions. This can be seen in the focused attention to one's Blackberry during a meeting or looking over at the caller id to see who a call is from while you are meeting with someone. It is these very actions that impact how we see ourselves, how we experience ourselves in being recognized and validated by others or, as in the examples above, are dismissed or lose our recognition altogether.

## **Making Sense from a Dominant Discourse View**

### **Waterline Model**

I would like to take up a frequently used model in organizational development work, Harrison's waterline model (1970), as a contrast to complex responsive processes (Stacey et al., 2000, Stacey and Griffin, 2005, Stacey, 2010, Streatfield, 2001, Shaw, 2002). Harrison developed a model that looked at the different levels at which you could intervene in a system for change. This was further developed by Scherer and Short (2001) to look at group tasks vis-à-vis group maintenance. The model looked at the tasks above the "waterline" and the maintenance required by group members to complete those tasks; the maintenance effort is below the waterline. The task aspect of the waterline model looks at what needs to be done to complete the goals or achieve the designated outcomes. The maintenance aspect includes how the group members feel toward each other and the effect of completing the task itself. If a group is not functioning well due to maintenance there are four descending levels where one can intervene. The deeper you descend, the higher the emotional and time investment.

The first intervening level is Structure, which examines clarity of goals and roles, decision-making authority in reaching goals and effective role organization. The second level is Group. This looks at team effectiveness, participation, influence, learning interactions, conflict resolution, group membership and interaction patterns. The third is the Interpersonal level showing how individuals communicate with each

other and how they respond to conflict one on one. The fourth level is the Intrapersonal that looks at the experience of the individuals who are in the process of working together and how effective they are in learning from the experience. I think this is relevant when looking at The Practicing Perfection Institute's approach called the Error Elimination System™ where the focus is primarily on Structure and Group. If these are clarified through the training and process of error elimination, mistakes will either be minimized and/or eliminated. This is consistent with the dominant discourse on systems intervention. An expert consultancy is invited in and, using a technical approach that can be scientifically validated, they offer a series of solutions through a group of workshops and coaching. The outcome in an industry such as power generation is a dramatic drop in errors and unplanned outages.

So what is important about this way of looking at the issues that arise in a power plant and how do we make sense of it? A way of understanding this would be to look at both the waterline model and error elimination from the science of certainty and a rationalist, efficient and formative causality (Stacey, 2010). This offers Gary and his management team a sense of being in control of the errors that might occur at the plant. At some level this allows them a level of prediction of outcome that is good enough. What is missing, I would argue, is being attentive to the level of unpredictability—human interaction is not deterministic and it is the micro interactions that will impact the success of the Error Elimination System™ and the waterline model. The intervention is at the level of human interaction—the micro level. The focus of both these interventions lies predominantly at the macro level (the organization/the system), which is in contrast with the thinking of complex responsive processes. It offers us a way of thinking about why this is happening by arguing “that generalized/idealized population wide patterns, imaginatively constructed as wholes emerge in a myriad of local interactions in which they are made particular and functional” (Stacey, 2007, p. 316-317). I will take up this idea of functionalizing and particularizing later on in this chapter when I challenge Gary in a long email to reflect on the “code of honor” that he and his team are developing and how this will interact with all of the other teams “codes of honor” that are being developed. I will reflect further on the idea of local interaction later in this paper with the discussion surrounding the interaction between Gary and the union business manager on the

issue of overtime during a planned outage and whether or not the union will be able to continue to support error elimination even though it was the union leadership that first suggested this program.

The contrast of these two approaches, the waterline model and error elimination, and complex responsive processes are in how we choose to make sense of *how* what is happening is actually happening. It is this key difference between the “idealized whole” and local interactions that can help us understand what is happening.

### *Comparative Dimensions of a Consulting Practice*

Consulting in organizations can be divided into three major categories: traditional management, or expert consulting where the consultant manages the consultancy; organizational development, or collaborative consulting where the consultant and the client manage the consultancy; and systems, or differentiated consulting where the consultant coaches the client toward managing him/herself in the system (Bader, 1995) Appendix A. In my work with Gary and this management team I experienced myself consistently in the third category. I had no interest in being and/or acting as the expert in the room; however, what was present in my mind was the consultant’s role as a coach (Flaherty, 1999, Sieler, 2003, Whitworth et al., 1998) and coaching Gary and his management team toward managing themselves in their team.

In working with Gary and his team I was clear on my role, what influence I had and who my sponsors were. According to Schein (1987, 1999), process consulting is structured around the concept that the client is the one who takes responsibility for the issue he/she is seeing and takes ownership of the issues throughout the consulting process. My goal with Gary and his team was to help them fine-tune their understanding of where they saw the challenges (in the adoption and institutionalization of error elimination) and then to help them embrace the decisions they needed to make. I wanted my role to be one where, through conversation and critiquing their day-to-day approach, they might gain insight, clarity, supplementary ways of focusing their viewpoint, and alternative plans of action in their implementation of Practicing Perfection.



## **Recognition of Self Through Others**

I want to look at this idea from a number of perspectives because I believe each nuanced view leads back to similar experiences. There is Gary and how he is recognized as the general manager of the plant. Gary is the general manager because he has the title. He is also the general manager because others see him as the general manager. There are other managers, supervisors, key stakeholders and individual contributors and each one of them is also engaged in this interplay of recognizing and being recognized by others. Last but not least, I want to be recognized and offer recognition to others. So how do we make sense of this and why is it important? This idea of recognition through others is taken up in the work of complex responsive processes (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, Streatfield, 2001, Stacey, 2010, Shaw, 2002, Griffin, 2002, Honneth, 1995).

Complex responsive processes look at organizations as an ongoing patterning of repeated non-linear interactions between human agents. With the involvement of human agents, emotions are present. And, for example, with the facets of human interaction through communication (in the form of verbal gestures) and ongoing relationships of power, humans are continuously evaluating and making choices. This way of looking at human interactions is based on the work of Mead (1934) and Elias (1978) who see power as a necessary part of our interdependent human relations. It is this interplay of constraint and enabling, which creates this interdependence even as we experience power in the work place. In understanding power in this relational sphere one is able to understand the imbalance of power and how the more powerful need the less powerful. It is this ongoing interplay between the human agents that creates the structure of the relationships—this interdependence. Gary is the general manager of the plant and it is the interactions that he has with his management team and the individual contributors at the plant that will create the successful deployment of error elimination.

As we take up this idea of mutual recognition it might serve us to actually wind backward and look at the concept of reification as developed originally by Georg Lukacs (Lukacs, 1923 / 1972) and then further developed and reflected upon by Norbert Elias (Elias, 1978) and Honneth (Honneth, 2008b, Honneth, 2008a). Lukacs saw reification as arising out of a capitalist commodity exchange and that

through the day-to-day interactions of calculations and decision making, it leads to a process of rationalization that eventually changes all phenomena to objects of economic exchange. He saw this happening to all domains, whether humans and their intersubjective relationships or natural processes and the products they bring forth. In the end, all of these phenomena lose their vibrancy and aliveness. Lukacs (1923/1972) put it succinctly as “a relation between people has taken on the character of a thing” (p. 83).

In his work, Elias is concerned about *how* reification is taken up in the intersubjective relationship or its social aspect—that the loss of the dimension of the social or, perhaps a better way to say it is the tension between the individual and the social. Reification is then the habit of forgetting the genesis in social interaction of what seems, in the moment, to be an object in itself and that is sustained only in social interaction. So he is specifically seeing this as arising in the social and then residing there. I would go further and argue that it might be seen as a chronic aspect of interaction due to a lack of awareness and the gestures so consistently present in our day-to-day, taken-for-granted interactions and the language we choose to use. I think that the interaction I had with Fran and Gary around the statement made by Fran that Gary needed to move to the next level is a great example of this. Gary’s movement resides in his social interactions and the patterns that arise out of that. His localized interactions are with his direct reports and it is through those interactions that Gary will emerge and expand his role.

Axel Honneth looks at this idea in The Tanner Lectures and in his book *Disrespect*. In the Tanner Lectures, he is looking to both revive the idea and the use of it and, at the same time, offer a critique that moves its use and observation in to the domain of the social both as the interactions between individuals and with oneself. The connection he is making is in the phenomena of recognition and its iteration in mutual recognition of the other and self. He saw the issue as our ability to reify others, our interactions and ourselves. Honneth’s characterization of this process, similar to Elias, is one of forgetting the genesis of what is actually transpiring. I think this aspect at the self-level is particularly telling: it is the individual’s inability to articulate his/her feelings and desires because they think these are not worthy of articulation. Honneth saw this as leading to an inability to gain access to the mental life that one

needs for maintaining one's self relationship. He saw this as an aspect of self-care. I think this also ties to Mead's concept of self-realization and how we experience ourselves as having a unique value to the surrounding social world we are interacting in.

The concern I have with reification is that it is present in the earlier waterline model I presented; it is present in the error elimination process and, in some ways, in the earlier speech acts I introduced. Knowing that it is present, my next reflection is how this impacts the understanding of mutual recognition between Gary and me, Gary and his team and so on. In Honneth's view, it is this forgetting of the genesis of our relationship that then leads us to a place of not mutually recognizing each other. It is the importance of this that I would like to explore next.

Honneth developed the idea of mutual recognition by looking at Hegel's early work in his Jena lectures and his writing (Hegel, 1983). In these works Hegel explores the phenomena of identity formation and how this resides in intersubjective recognition. Honneth then draws on Mead's social psychology work (1934) to develop three key areas of recognition: (a) love, the use of this term is in reference to the love experienced in primary relationships such as that which develops between a parent and child or in deep friendships (it is characterized by strong emotional attachments between a small group of people); (b) legal rights:

In the case of the law, Hegel and Mead drew this connection on the basis of the fact that we can only come to understand ourselves as the bearers of rights when we know, in turn, what various normative obligations we must keep vis-à-vis others: only once we have taken the perspective of the 'generalized other', which teaches us to recognize the other members of the community as the bearers of rights, can we also understand ourselves to be legal persons, in the sense that we can be sure that certain of our claims will be met. (Honneth, 1995, p.121)

and (c) solidarity:

In order to be able to acquire an undistorted relation-to-self, human subjects always need—over and above the experience of affectionate care and legal recognition—a form of social esteem that allows them to

relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities. (Honneth, 1995, p.121)

The phenomena of recognition and mutual recognition are, I would argue, especially important in the organizations where people are working. It is critical for me to know (that as a member of an organization) I have certain rights that are mutually agreed to and that there are norms established to create the legal exchange of work such as receiving a paycheck at the end of a specified period, appropriate performance reviews and so on. Another aspect of recognition is the solidarity that emerges at work between colleagues. If the connection was, in some way, dramatically broken or changed (e.g., an organization downsizing and resulting in a series of layoff), this occurrence would truncate relationships of solidarity for both the individuals staying and for those leaving the organization. This work setting interruption, I will argue, creates both a level of anxiety and a chronic loss of recognition.

A final connection I will make is with Freud's work and specifically with his essay *The Uncanny* (Freud, 1919 / 2003). I am taking this up analogically. In other words, there are attributes or phenomena that Freud is illustrating that might be useful in making sense of what is going on in this narrative and "...that the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (p. 124). Freud developed two domains of the uncanny. The first was based in literature and how writers are able to create this sense of the uncanny in the reader and the second was based on our actual experiences in the living present. The distinctions he offers are "to complete the picture, for having considered animism, magic, sorcery, the omnipotence of thought, unintended repetition and the castration complex..."(149) and, further, "Here too, then, the uncanny [the 'unhomely'] is what was once familiar ['homely']" (151).

The attributes or phenomena that connect and create a sense of the uncanny in the work place that I would like to take up are: a) the omnipotence of thought—in the case of the honor codes that each team developed and then memorized and a number of teams recite before the shift begins each day as if by doing this in some way it will actually make it so and insure the success of eliminating errors, b) the unintended repetition (the scheduled outage)—the process repeats itself each time an outage is

scheduled (How will the question of the overtime issue be taken up and/or dealt with?), c) the castration complex—the loss of some part of our body, in this case referring to the reproductive organs (How does this occur in day-to-day relationships and can it be experienced or seen analogically?), d) uncanny as the occurrence of something that is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time—this aspect of the uncanny was also taken up by Heidegger (2000)—and relating it to my own work which is familiar, in that I know what work I am doing, and uncanny, because it is not at the same time familiar. In other words I am always stepping into an unknown relationship with my client/s. The settings might have familiar attributes and yet the relationships are unknown. In addition, it is this idea of the uncanny that links both the reification and lack of recognition that occurs in organizations. It is the familiar becoming unfamiliar. I believe that as individuals encounter either of these phenomena they experience some level of anxiety, trepidation and the uncanny nature of what is occurring. As they experience events in their day-to-day work they come to a realization that something is different and perhaps slightly disturbing—and yet, they are unable to identify it. As they struggle with this anxiety, they will ascribe what is happening to the system, the organization, their boss, their direct reports, and maybe even themselves. What they are experiencing through the process of reification is the experience of the genesis of their interactions disappearing. And, therefore, as a person's role is being spoken of, it is forgotten that the defined role can only emerge to be at its fullest in the social interaction that occurs between manager and direct reports or within a group of colleagues. In the context of reification, mutual recognition and those moments of the uncanny, I would like to continue this narrative with a conversational intervention with Gary and his team, an email I sent Gary and coaching conversations with Gary over the phone and in person.

### **A Conversational Intervention with Gary and his Team**

Before my return visit to Limestone in January I had two one-hour coaching conversations with Gary. One of those coaching conversations focused on the poor attendance of the meeting he had scheduled in December and the fact that all of the managers left in the middle of the meeting to participate in a conference call. As Gary reflected on this and re-read the email announcing the conference call about the fatality, he realized that any one member of his team could have listened and

summarized the telephone call. There was no mandatory requirement for every manager to join the call. As he continued reflecting he commented that, in point of fact, the telephone call contained no new information. I expressed to Gary my curiosity about the situation by asking, “What compelled the management team to move as if they were automatons to congregate for this call? What are the norms? What are the expected behaviors? What are the mixed messages you send employees?” As we finished the coaching call I wondered out loud if it would be useful to bring his team together and sit in conversation around some of the questions I had just raised with him. Gary thought that would be a great idea.

What was I doing? How do I make sense of what I had just suggested to Gary? I would argue that this is a moment of immersion and abstraction. I was deeply engaged in the conversation with Gary; I was deeply engaged in the suggested facilitation back in December; and, I was now abstracting at some level to offer both Gary and myself a different way of understanding what was happening. I see the impact and engagement that his management team had on the coaching process. How can I have an impact on both Gary and his team?

It was 05:30 on January 19, 2010; traffic on Westheimer Road in Houston, TX was light. It was drizzling and a cool 38°F. I had a three-hour drive ahead of me, lots of time to reflect and get ready for my client Gary. The drive was uneventful; the morning coaching session was light on content. Our conversation moved to the team meeting and that Gary had drawn up an agenda. I negotiated with Gary to be open to whatever emerged in the conversation and to allow me the latitude to follow the emergent topics. I also reminded Gary that we wanted to meet in a room where we could have a circle of chairs. I have a bias toward not having tables; my experience is that individuals use the physical furniture attribute to create hard boundaries between themselves and others. We met in the small auditorium. There was no circle—just chairs arranged around a table. I enlisted Gary and we re-arranged the chairs. His management team of direct reports filtered in and there were seven plus Gary. We all grabbed a chair.

Gary started talking, explaining why we were there. As I listened to Gary I scanned the circle and noticed how some individuals had adjusted and repositioned their chairs. They were not quite in the circle as they now had only one of their

shoulders turned in toward the center of the ring. Their gesture might be seen as “I am here only because I was told to be here.” I noticed how I was making sense of the information.

The conversation touched on a number of issues around error elimination, the low attendance and the subsequent exodus from the meeting the previous month. Then I simply asked, “How are you recognized and how do you recognize others?” What ensued was silence. I let it hang; I scanned the circle and watched as a number of individuals readjusted themselves in their seats. I continued with an example I had used earlier with Gary: “If it is how we choose to recognize each other that actually allows us to emerge as individuals then Gary’s role as general manager emerges in the way he recognizes each of you and in the way you recognize Gary.” There was a brief silence and then Mike the operations manager picked up the conversation and others joined in. Where the conversation moved from there was interesting. The connection they made was that when they were in conversation with direct reports or Gary, and they checked their vibrating Blackberry, they were not actually recognizing and honoring the person they were conversing with face-to-face. I then asked, “Is there an expectation that you respond to your Blackberry immediately?” The group looked at each other somewhat perplexed. Nobody had ever asked them that question. So my next question was, “How has this norm been created?” There was no real answer to this query either. I used this opportunity to illustrate the idea of an unspoken value around responsiveness and competency, and how they chose to functionalize it in their everyday interactions without ever questioning its emergence or its impact. What followed was a robust and fascinating conversation on how they could choose to change their response to the Blackberry tether. Noon rolled around and Gary had ordered pizza for the group’s lunch. We ate; then I checked in with Gary and headed back to Houston.

### **An Email**

The email I summarize below was my response to Gary asking for feedback on the code of honor he and his management team had developed as part of the Error Elimination Program. This again, I think, is in keeping with the idea of critique, asking the client—in this case Gary and his team—to examine what they are taking for granted in their day-to-day interactions and to be aware of the choices they are

making and the language they are using in making those choices. Are they merely using business jargon, platitudes and panaceas that sound good? And are they then left on the shelf because of the inability to functionalize the values expressed in their honor code? In the case of this particular initiative not only does the management team develop a code of honor, but also each working team develops a code with their team and their immediate supervisor. One of the questions that I raised with Gary in regards to this was. “How do these codes of honor interface with each other?”

My intent in the email was to challenge Gary to look at the taken-for-granted assumptions he and his team were making and how, as these codes of honor/values are iterated throughout each team, the possibility of conflict eventually arises between teams and between individuals as these values are functionalized. What was especially striking was the value of safety over production. I advocated to Gary that these two values, safety and production, existed in a paradoxical relationship and that they functioned symbiotically. I have come to realize that the other aspect of these honor codes for each team is that they are a way of creating a mental construct of certainty of outcome. If we have these codes and we adhere to them, there will be a reduction in errors. Through the codes an ideology is being created and a set of values espoused that will have to be functionalized by each team. If we take this same concern up from complex responsive processes what we choose to look at is the various gestures and responses that are taking place on each team. What are the micro interactions and how might this then pattern out into the whole plant?

### **Final Coaching Conversations and Visit to Limestone**

I followed up the January 30th email (see email content above) with a one-hour coaching conversation on February 3, 2010. The conversation had the usual components of checking in with one another, banter, wondering how the plant was doing with the planned outage and so on. Then Gary commented on the fact that he was concerned about the overtime and that he needed to address this issue. But then he changed the subject and moved on. This caught my attention and I asked Gary if he could tell me a little more about why he mentioned the overtime. In a nutshell, the planned outage the previous year had not gone well: cost overruns, poor tracking of expenditures, and during the outage a very exhausted team worked seven days a week between 8 and 10 hours each day. (This overtime issue is different in context than



what is narrated in Chapter Four as regards to Dave's situation at the Connecticut plants. The outcomes and concerns end up being the same: increase in near misses, increase in injuries, increase in mistakes, and so on. This is further explored in Chapter Four). By the end of the outage the whole team needed recovery time, which was not available because the plant was online. Fran Sullivan participated in the debrief (after-action report). When all was said and done, one of the key items that Fran stressed to Gary was to make certain that individuals got at least one day off each 7-day cycle during a planned outage. Gary expressed to me that he did not quite agree with this policy and, at the same time, he did not feel comfortable enough to disagree with Fran.

Roll forward seven months; Fran attends the planned outage review process final meeting. The reason for his presence is for someone outside the team to listen to the plan and critique it. As Gary is relating the narrative, I interrupt him and ask if he talked to Fran at that meeting about the overtime issue. His answer was "No" that he sidestepped it. So Gary is now (February 3, 2010) in the middle of the planned outage, his team is generally working 7 days per week and he has not informed Fran. I ask Gary what he thinks would happen if an accident occurred or if the work fell behind schedule. He points out that there would be a debrief and, more than likely, the overtime would be identified as a possible contributor. My next question is, "How do you think Fran would react?" Gary sighs and says, "OK. I get it!" I reply that it is not a matter of *getting*—it is a matter of *having* the appropriate conversation with Fran and informing him that you are unable to meet his very specific overtime request.

As I am in this coaching conversation I am perplexed as to what is holding Gary back from having this type of conversation. What is his internal self-talk between himself and Fran about? I would argue that for Gary there is present here, in this interaction, a lack of recognition of both self and the other (in this case Fran). I think this is the issue they are struggling with. My hunch is that there is a lack of mutual recognition for both of these individuals in their relationship. In looking at this from a lack of recognition aspect, it is leading to greater constraints on Gary's part in his power relationship with Fran and resulting in himself silencing. In addition, there is an uncanny aspect to the way Gary takes this up. The experience I am having is that this is acceptable to Gary due to his past relationship with Fran. As we move to the

end of the conversation, I ask Gary if there is a declaration that he is willing to make around informing Fran about the current overtime and, in some way, addressing the overtime issue. His declaration is to talk to Fran and Joe, the union business manager, about the overtime situation and to do it before my next visit in mid-February.

I am back in Texas at Limestone on February 9th for my final visit. The coaching session is mainly about the themes that have arisen over the past five months. I check with Gary about the overtime issue. He has not spoken to Fran and when he brought it up with the union business manager at the plant, the response was somewhat unsettling to Gary. Joe basically told Gary that if the overtime situation on this outage were changed that the union would be unable to continue to support the error elimination initiative. I was amazed. The union representative had originally suggested the program and now they might have a difficult time supporting it! The coaching conversation took on an aspect of surrealism for me. This was my last visit; Gary had not dealt with the overtime issue with his boss Fran. I am thinking this is a major moving-to-the-next-level issue. And then the union business manager at the plant is creating a quid pro quo for union support of an initiative the union had originally suggested. Did Joe completely forget the genesis that actually started this process at the plant? Was this just something else that could be reified in the name of getting what you want for the union membership? I also wondered how all of this linked to the code of honor that each team had developed. The codes of honor all contain (a) safety over production and (2) treat each other with respect. This kind of interaction did not seem to be congruent with either. In some way I think I was having an “uncanny” experience as I was in the very process of wrapping up this assignment.

As part of this visit to Limestone, Gary had asked me if I was willing to facilitate another conversation with his team. I said I would be happy to and that the same set up applied. Gary omitted to tell me that the only space available was the large conference room.

I would like to take this up for a moment. There are number of ways of looking at this. First, it was just an oversight on Gary’s part or, alternatively, this is just Gary’s ongoing pattern—doing it how he wants to do it and asking for forgiveness later. At some level, this was for me annoying and I could choose to interpret it as a lack of recognition and, by implication, a show of lack of respect. I am

also led to reflect on how Gary might be co-creating his poor relationship with Fran by not dealing with the overtime issue. There is also an uncanny aspect to this as if it is business as usual; this is an accepted practice on Gary's part—his way of engaging in the enabling and constraining aspects of the interplay of power dynamics.

So there we were around a large conference table. I chose to let it be. I say my goodbyes, as there is a good chance I will not see these individuals again. This is their threshold. I need to take my leave in good style knowing that this is their work to continue. Pizza is delivered. I have a quick lunch. I thank Gary and his team explaining I am trying to get out of Houston before the east coast shuts down with the forecasted bad weather. I head back to Houston, but I am too late; the east coast and Chicago are completely closed to flights. I acquire an unplanned opportunity to spend my three days in Houston reflecting on the past five months of work with Gary and his team at Limestone.

As I sit in a Houston hotel and reflect what emerges for me is a story—I have interacted with a group of people and, in some way, impacted on how they have been making sense of their work. I am left wondering about Gary's recognition of me as a coach and organizational development consultant. What was it at the end that did not move him to address the overtime issue with Fran? Why was our last group meeting around a conference table when I specifically requested a circle of chairs to allow for a more intimate conversation? How was I co-creating some aspect of lack of recognition for Gary? I think this is all part of the nature of my work: stepping into an organization for a period of time, exploring certain questions and creating new questions that might not be answered by the time my work is done. In the end looking at ways of making sense of what is happening in the day-to-day, taken for granted interactions we are involved at work.

I also see this as the work of coaches and organizational development consultants. There is an ongoing challenge to step into the unknown quality of relationships with new clients. There is the interplay and difficulties of the struggle for recognition and the contrivances one might go through to create some level of certainty. Through all of this is interwoven the interplay of the familiar and the unfamiliar leading to a sense of the uncanny especially in relationship to dealing with the unknown. If that is my experience I would argue it is also the experience of the

client/s. The client is challenged by the unknown nature of the relationship with the coach/consultant; they are also struggling for recognition of themselves in the relationship with the coach/consultant and in how they are going to recognize this new relationship. So even for the client in their familiar setting there is an aspect of the unfamiliar, leading to some level of the uncanny.

## **Conclusion**

In this narrative I have shared the work I did at the NRG Energy Limestone Plant in Jewett, TX. This work occurred over a five-month period. What has emerged for me in this narrative, as I reflect back, are the number of key ways of making sense of my work and the work my clients are involved in themselves. From Goffman's idea of how in many ways we are all actors in some "social play", presenting ourselves, and at the same time improvising our role in the living present. This view allowed me to free myself and, at some moments, become looser in my role, to be more willing to be present with the novelty and spontaneity that Stacey and Shaw reflect upon in their writing about complex responsive processes.

As my exploration reflection continued I was moved by the ideas of Honneth around the ongoing struggle we are engaged in for recognition, how we offer others recognition, the interplay of this recognition and the emergence of leading. As I explored this concept I was moved to look at reification and how these phenomena can rob an individual of his/her own recognition and then how it all plays out in our relationships with colleagues. Finally, reading Freud's essay *The Uncanny* offered me a view to the chronic anxiety that exists in organizations. The anxiety arising out of the day-to-day, taken for granted interactions that reify individuals and their interactions and robbing them and others of the recognition that will allow the emergence of richness, novelty, spontaneity and recognition in those interactions. The uncanny also linked to the nature of the familiar and unfamiliar for both the coach/consultant and the clients—specifically, the aspect of the unknown that shows up in the nature of the relationship. I would take this a step further and offer that the client/s is challenged by her constant re-entry into a familiar work group and experiencing some level of unfamiliarity due to the coaching and or training they have been involved in.

Based on the above narrative I would argue that if we are to engage as coaches/consultants and work from a vantage point of a causality of uncertainty, we will experience an ongoing sense of the uncanny in our relationships. The work we are engaged in with a coaching client's is not dyadic in nature, although many times it presents itself this way. The work with the individual client involves interacting with a cast of characters that the client is involved with in their day-to-day interactions from direct reports, their boss, their bosses' boss, key stakeholders and so on. The relationship that the coach/consultant is involved with is perpetually being constructed with known and unknowns emerging at the same time. I think a key component in all of this is the ongoing struggle for recognition that is present for all parties and this offers the coach/consultant a key vantage point of reflection on what might be happening with the group they are working with. Finally, I think reification has offered me a new awareness of how models, techniques, and best practices can seduce the practitioner to forgetting the genesis of their work: the social interaction with the person/s who hired them.

In the next chapter I will take up how leadership, decision making, group development, and conflict are taught, delivered and experienced in client groups and if they are different depending on how we make sense of our experience. In addition, I will look at how we might interpret our experience based upon a rationalist causality of certainty or a transformative causality of uncertainty (Stacey, 2010), and then connect this to complex responsive processes as a method of learning.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project 3, December 2010

#### Fire and decision making in Big Sur

##### Introduction

My work in February took me to the Wildland Fire and Training Conference Center in McClellan, California, formerly the site of McClellan Air Force Base, to the National Interagency Wildland Fire Training Academy for work that I was doing for the National Outdoor Leadership School Professional Training (NOLS Pro). This section of the school customizes courses for various professional groups such as the NASA shuttle astronauts, US Navy Midshipmen and new Officers, Google Inc. directors and Wharton Leadership Venture Fellows, to name a few. This particular training is called an L380. It is delivered over a 7-day period in a backcountry setting and each day is closely structured. The onus is on the participants to complete the entire prescribed curriculum and the faculty is responsible for making sure that all of the material is delivered. If these criteria are not met, participants cannot graduate.

I want to explore the following questions:

- How are leadership, decision making and group development, and conflict taught, delivered and experienced in client groups?
- Is there another way of making sense of this learning?
- How learning is made sense of from a complex responsive processes viewpoint?
- Is there an underpinning of rationalist causality of certainty (Stacey, 2010) this type of leadership development is based on?
- What would the participants experience be if the leadership development was based on a transformative causality of uncertainty (Stacey, 2010)?

The question that is raised for me in this narrative is how leadership development is used in organizations as a platform for change. And, further, how this leadership development is based on models and theories that are a reification of past sense making of day-to-day interactions in organizations. What becomes urgent for me is an understanding of practice and method and how we make sense of this in the day-to-day iterations of ongoing change in organizations. To assist

me with my examination I will look at the current mainstream literature on leading, explore involvement and detachment in our day-to-day interactions; look at our present understanding of time and how we might experience time differently, ideology, power and poison oak. In conclusion, I will link these findings to my understanding of my practice and method and how this might be generalizable.

### **McClellan Air Force Base, California**

It is an early Friday morning and there is a late winter chill in the California sunrise. I walk from what used to be the barracks on McClellan Air Force Base to the building that now houses the Interagency Wildland Fire Training Academy. At one time this building was a top security facility, so much so that the roof of the building is painted like a parking lot—from space (satellite imaging) the building disappears as it blends in with the surrounding parking lot. This is where the US Central Command planned Desert Storm (1991). I walk down the hallway to the large room that is going to be used by twelve NOLS instructors, six Fire Academy instructors and the briefing team to prep for these courses. There will be six courses: each with two NOLS instructors, one Fire Academy instructor and twelve students.

As I travel down that hall, I stop and look at the black and white photos of past fires interspersed with maps and narratives about the fatalities. I see information about the people who died, what happened and a list of changed or new procedures so that this type of disaster will not happen again. Retina security scanners remain on many of the doors. There is a quality of tightness and rigidity to this building, partially due to its airtight security configuration left over from its previous iteration. There is, however, also sadness—lethal reminders about fire and its impact on human life. And I also reflect on the other aspect of fire and how it brings life and blossoming back to a ravaged forest. Fire clears the underbrush and debris, releases nutrients in the soil, and allows serotinous cones to open and release their seeds. Many trees have defenses against different levels of fire such as thick bark and dense stumps that allow for new life to sprout after a fire. Fire in the forest exists in the paradox of life and death.

I enter our briefing conference room. It is a spacious double conference room; however, an excessively large square conference table swallows up a quarter of the space. Several of my colleagues from NOLS are already here and it is good to see

them. We engage in the banter that occurs between colleagues who spend an intense time of immersion working together and then do not see each other for months or years. Having done this sort of work for over eighteen years, it is a familiar and joyous ritual of reconnection. Everyone slowly gathers and by 07:50 all the seats are taken and we are ready to begin. Jake Freed, who is the Assistant Director for NOLS Pro, welcomes everybody and rapidly hands the meeting over to Carrie Dodge, the briefer/de-briefer for this road show. The briefing moves along fairly succinctly. There is a recap of what happened in January when NOLS ran ten of these courses simultaneously while a 100-year storm struck the coastal range (80-100 mile per hour winds and rainfall at the rate of 2-4 inches per hour) and lasted for five days. Carrie assures us the weather forecast is somewhat better this time.

The briefing continues apace until I am halted in mid-thought when Kate Koons asks about maps for the course areas we will be operating in. Carrie states that we will have two sets of maps for all of the students and one set for each NOLS instructor. Carrie goes on to explain that until the course areas are settled on no additional investment will be made on maps. Kate who is Senior Faculty politely makes the point that this might impact the student experience. Carrie thanks her and moves on with the briefing. I am distracted by this map discussion. (The standard is a set of maps for every two students and one set for each instructor.) It would mean we would only have access to a total of six student sets and three instructor sets including the fire instructor. What I am experiencing here is that I am immersed in the briefing and I am also abstracting (Stacey, 2010). Or as Elias would describe it, involved and detached (Elias, 1987) to make sense of what is happening and the choice that is being made. The way I made sense of it in the moment was that this was Carrie's and the NOLS Pro way of functionalizing the value of frugality and to me it seemed a very bizarre way—one not producing a big or safe yield for the dollars they are saving. I will return to this idea of functionalizing values later on in this narrative. What I am also struck by is the lack of challenge and/or the willingness to accept this answer by both others and myself in that room. A way of making sense of this is to look at Goffman's work on teams (1959); he makes the point that there is a professional etiquette that exists as a constraining and enabling condition that holds the team together, especially in the presence of others who are not on the team (client/s). So



with both NOLS staff and Forest Service staff in the room together, the condition formed by an unwillingness to embarrass (“professional etiquette”) with the desire to show the client a unified team (thinking that the client is most probably not aware of this internal standard) was allowed to trail off at the meeting. It will, however, have to be dealt with in the field by the instructor team.

The rest of the briefing was straight forward and once it was over at 10:30, three of us started to work together as an instructor team: Chris (Course Leader), Leonard (Fire Academy Instructor) and myself. The work involves figuring out a route, prepping group gear, organizing rations and so on. Day Two starts with a curriculum briefing, instructor team “team building” and then we continue the expedition preparations.

On Day Three we meet the students at 08:00, do a gear check, and the next step is a briefing. The goal is to role model using the IRPG (Incident Response Pocket Guide), to clarify the Leader’s Intent (Commanders Intent) and to introduce SOP’s (Standard Operating Procedures) based on the briefing. The briefing checklist has six components: Situation, Mission/Execution, Communications, Service/Support, Risk Management, Questions or Concerns (Group, 2010). Chris leads this off. I am reflecting on how we usually approach this with students and clients: we talk about goals and expectations for the expedition and it is more of a conversation as opposed to the staccato clipping off of boxes on a checklist. I am up next to talk about and engage in an activity to develop a Positive Learning Environment (PLE). We get the group organized and load up the vans, one for gear and one for participants. I am fighting a severe migraine headache at this point; I can barely focus my eyes. We are loaded up and off on a five-hour drive to Las Ventanas in the Big Sur costal range. The drive takes us through the central valley, fruit orchards and artichoke fields, over the northern part of the coastal range beside the Pacific coast and then along a winding and narrow road to a road head at 2500 ft. in a saddle facing the ocean. Oh yes, it is raining.

We unload the vans in short order as our drivers have a 15-minute turn around so that they can stay within their 10-hour drive window. I confer with Chris who is the course leader (CL) as to what he wants to do. Considerations are the rain, sunset at 18:00, our need to gate a bunch of short classes on campsite selection, setting up a

tent, sleeping warm and dry, stove use and cooking dinner. We opt not to hike and to set up in the campground at the road head. Chris and I knock out the classes fairly rapidly despite the rain, wind and dropping temperature. When we get to stove use and dinner it is dusk and we teach students in the twilight how to use a stove and make dinner. The rain has stopped; clouds overhead are breaking. We have a brief evening meeting and check in with the leadership team for the next day.

### **Hiking in the Ventanas**

The morning is clear, breakfast eaten, packs packed, and we assemble as a group so that the Leadership team can brief us based on the *IRPG* briefing checklist and what some of the *SOP*'s for the day will be. I am reflecting on how I find acronyms both exclusionary and inclusive at the same time. If you know the acronyms based on your culture, you are an insider; at the same time if you are not fluent in the acronyms or jargon, you are an outsider (Elias, 1965). Not only is this setting up a group situation of outsider/insider it is also a way for the group to engage in “people processing” (Goffman, 1983, Jenkins, 2008). Goffman uses the illustration of interviewing and performance review. What I would argue is that these are in the day-to-day patterns that arise in groups coming together and are the subtle signs of power being played out unconsciously and consciously by the different group members. I would also argue that this is an ongoing pattern of wanting to belong to the group that we are in and that causing the other members to not seem to fit in allows us to experience more belonging on our part. I will elaborate on this interplay of power later on in the narrative. We finish up the briefings, split up into two hiking groups—each being led by one of the leaders of the day (LOD) so Chris and I each hike with one of the groups. As we set off on the hike, what is on my mind is locating and avoiding poison oak. I am highly allergic to all irritant plant life and I generally avoid wilderness areas where these plants are present. (Poison oak, poison ivy, and poison sumac are vines and shrubs that are part of the same genus. They each emit a chemical called urushiol and once this oil makes contact with the skin a rash ensues.) The students find this amusing as I ask them to identify any poison oak; I want to be certain I stay away from it. The hike is generally uneventful until we hit a large burn area. The burn area extends up and down the slope and the trail travels through the burn area. The concern and conversation centers around snags (burnt dead trees that

are still standing). I listen to the fairly animated conversation that ensues and as I listen what I am struck by is the mythological quality to the conversation. The information that is being offered to help make decisions is a series of assessments stated as assertions. There is no evidence being offered that an assessment of risk of traveling through this burn area is based on fact and the LOD (Bill) appears to be stumped. Our destination is 3 miles on the other side of this burn; however, Bill and the other LOD did not cover this “snag” area situation in the briefing this morning. Some of the group members are fairly animated and strident in their concern about proceeding. Bill turns to me with a perplexed look. I choose to do nothing, say nothing. Bill finally acknowledges he is not sure what to do. My first question is to the whole group “How is this working for all of you?” Again, the loudest most forceful voices surface stating that they are not hiking through that death trap. Both the hyperbole and the silent members of the group fascinate me. I wonder out loud if all are in agreement. Finally, some of the silent group members speak and express that they know how to evaluate a burn area, but, at the same time, they are not sure if the same criteria applies in hiking through an area that was burned in the past. I simply ask, “What do we know about this burn?” The facts are that it actually happened about three years ago, root integrity lasts for about 8-10 years after a burn and recently there was a major storm in this area with weeklong torrential rain and winds 80-110 mph. My hunch (based on this information and the fact that there was no wind at present) was that the risk of a snag falling was minimal. The loudest voices chimed in their objections pointing out that I am not a wildland firefighter. I want to take a moment and connect this to my earlier comments on belonging to a group—how one is processed into the group and how this is an iteration of the dynamic of power in a group. Some members of the group do not want to proceed so how do they influence the group? How do they deal with the anxiety they are experiencing? One way is to call to question the competency of the individual who is holding the designated leadership position by making them not part of the group (the group being wildland firefighter) and the competency they bring through their experience. The implication being that some experience or knowledge is more accurate. The next gesture on my part is to contextualize and justify why I think my experience is as valid or possibly more valid. What is being played out here is the spontaneous series of gesture and

responses that both enable and constrain and are the day-to-day experience we have in experiencing power in groups (Elias, 1991, Elias, 1978, Elias, [1939] 2000). I acknowledged that I did not have that particular background and I pointed out that I have traveled through a large number of burn areas in my 20-plus years in the backcountry. I posed the question to the group and leader, “What do you want to do?” The discussion continued, all of the group members voiced their opinion. Bill summarized what he heard and decided that the group should continue to travel across the burn area as expeditiously as possible. There was some mild resistance, but then the group started to travel again.

The day finishes up with an After Action Review (AAR) with a format that seeks to answer the following questions: What was planned? What actually happened? Why did it happen? What can we do next time? (Group, 2007, Group, 2010) The format can be extended to make sure all parties are heard from. It can also be used as a rapid iteration tool known as a chainsaw AAR. Bill’s facilitation of the AAR is between extended and chainsaw. My role is to coach Bill and the group to help them experience an effective AAR. The concern for me is not the structure of the model. What I am paying attention to, and making sense of, is how the individuals are interacting; how are they talking and exchanging their ideas of making sense of this day; what does power look like in this group; and, are they aware that they are using a model to make sense of their day. What I want to make sense of is the role of social interaction that is occurring and leads to sense making and decision making, how does this translate to teaching individuals and groups and how to transfer this skill to high stress life and death decisions. What I am aware of is that I want to make sense of how complex responsive processes connect with experiential teaching for populations that function in high risk activities that are hierarchical in structure, rely on a military model structure and on the scientific method to make sense of their domain.

Both groups have arrived at the destination and both have completed their AAR. I am looking around at the various campsites available in this Little Pines Col and right now my focus is on the poison oak. Chris interrupts my poison oak reflection. “Sam, you’re up. Leadership and 4/7/1.” (This is NOLS’s take on making sense of leadership: 4 roles, 7 skills and 1 signature style (NOLS, 2000)). At school we teach, talk about and act as if this model is actually alive at some level. The way I

make sense of this and have come to experience this model is as a second order abstraction (Stacey, 2010). At some level we have forgotten the genesis of the model; it was a way of making sense of our experiences on expeditions. It was a way of being immersed and abstracting to help us and our students make sense of our daily interactions and experiences on expeditions. I also know that there is an expectation that it is taught and delivered a certain way, which I choose to conform to while also allowing myself some slight digression so as to create the space for some reflective conversation around this class.

### **Back Story, Fire History**

The relationship with the US Forest Service started back in 2005 when Kanengieter was director of NOLS Professional Training and Dave was Director for the NOLS Rocky Mountain Branch. Kanengieter, through his work at NOLS Pro, was involved in the program development for Wharton Leadership Ventures with Mark Davidson. This program is overseen by Professor Michael Useem, who has had an ongoing interest in wildland firefighting as a means for Wharton MBA's to better understand decision making in situations of high stress, high risk and with catastrophic consequences. Davidson and Useem suggested that Kanengieter get in touch with Jim Cook to see if NOLS Pro might be able to deliver the L380. Dave's brother, John, worked at the Bureau of Land Management and at that time was in charge of Fire and Aviation for all of Wyoming. (Today he is in charge of Fire and Aviation for the Bureau of Land Management for all of the United States.) While Dave and John are out hunting and chatting, John chats about his frustration in and the quality of the L380 delivery. Dave suggested that he talk with Kanengieter at NOLS Pro. NOLS applied to become an approved provider and, accordingly, was approved in 2005. An additional layer that was added to the deliverable was that all NOLS faculty had to be approved by an auditor who would review their on-course performance. This, I would argue, is an additional aspect of the interplay of power and in keeping with what Goffman above describes as "people processing." There is a quality of the absurd to all of this since the current format is hotel/classroom based and 4 days in length; the NOLS format is 7 plus days and expedition/field based. The problem that popped up was that John was *not* in charge of curriculum and delivery of the L380 and Bill Miller was.

Bill Miller is a senior smoke jump team leader. He believes that the format, content and the creation of a stress-laced learning experience will develop individuals who will be able to make decisions and have their teams follow them in critical fire situations such as the Man Gulch Fire (Maclean, 1993); or as in the South Canyon Fire (Maclean, 1999) when and if jealous rivalries, bureaucratic bungling, and severe morale problems show up, they can be avoided; or as in the Thirty Mile Fire (Maclean, 2007) how a sense of mission can lead to death.

The additional layer to this relationship is the leadership of the Interagency Wildland Firefighting Academy. The leader of the Academy wants to use the L380 earlier in the firefighter training. Bill Miller, on the other hand, thinks these candidates do not have enough experience to benefit from this type of training. What is being played out is that there are a number of stakeholders interested in impacting training and improving outcomes. All of these individual agents are moved by and acting with the best of intentions. And yet, somehow the outcomes in the end, I will argue, are ones no one is really choosing.

The above back story or “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990) was not as orderly as I have just narrated it. It came in bits and pieces composed of snippets of conversation not chronologically arranged, bits of information alluded to or heard as parts of other narratives and, of course, from gossip. I will argue that this is all part of the day-to-day interactions that create the politics in many organizations and through a patterning of actions led to a place that no one foresaw. In addition, I want to examine how leadership development is constrained and moved by the power dynamics between individuals; how politics of interaction, budgets and revenue goals lead to delivering a product that meets the request for leadership training based on the current understanding of leadership and how this does not allow for an offering that might be different. I also want to examine how I can propose to the client and participants something closer to and more connected with what is actually happening in their day-to-day interactions.

In reflecting on the above narrative there are a number of salient patterns that emerge. First is the complexity and weaving of relationships; second is how the narrative itself is accessed by bits and pieces and how each human agent has a slightly different take on what is going on and what influence they might have; and third,

although all participants are generally acting and operating from a place of best intentions, what finally emerges is not quite what they had in mind. This is a good example of how day-to-day interactions pattern out and lead to outcomes that are both foreseen and unforeseen. This pattern will continue to emerge throughout the narrative.

A brief history of the US Forest Service (USFS) and fire will offer a context to this narrative and discussion. President Theodore Roosevelt set up the USFS in 1904 and Gifford Pinchot was the first head of the service. When Roosevelt left the oval office in 1909, the USFS was in charge of a landmass equal in size to France. At his departure, the new agency came under attack by a number of interests who wanted the protected land returned to private ownership. What changed the debate was “The Big Burn” in August 1910—in two days, three million acres burned (landmass equal in size to Connecticut), five towns were burned to their foundations and over one hundred people died. It was the heroism of the USFS rangers that caught the imagination of the public. The unintended consequence became a set policy for USFS to contain and fight wildland fires.

“The Big Burn” (Egan, 2009) of 1910 indelibly etched the USFS and wildland firefighters in the public’s mind and wildland firefighting is the major reason for the agency. Today, firefighting accounts for half of the annual budget of USFS (\$5.4 billion in 2011) and looking at this information:

The FY 2011 budget for the Forest Service supports the Administration’s priorities for maintaining and enhancing the resiliency and productivity of America’s forests through five key initiatives: Restoring and Sustaining Forest Landscapes; Protecting and Enhancing Water Resources and Watershed Health; Making Landscapes More Resilient to Climate Change; Responsibly Budgeting for Wildfire; and Creating Jobs and Sustainable Communities.

Available at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/aboutus/budget/>

I would posit that this is not what Theodore Roosevelt had in mind at the inception of the USFS. It is now fire—not the preservation of the resource as contemplated by Roosevelt and Pinchot—that shapes the day-to-day practice of this service. The power of fire had been mythologized in the American public’s mind and fire has influenced

the agency over the past 100 years marked by the Man Gulch Fire, Thirty Mile Fire, South Canyon Fire and the Yellowstone Fire of 1988.

The review of ensuing reports of the fatalities of the South Canyon Fire (1994) led to a renewed effort on the part of the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG), originally established in 1974, to figure out what leadership training needed to do in order to get leaders trained to deal with these high risks, catastrophic consequence situations. The focus led to using the resources at Quantico, the US Marine base located south of Washington, DC, responsible for Marine Corp Officer training and FBI agent training. As I explore this, it will seem ironic that the NWCG chose such a path because at this time there was an emerging undercurrent from frontline firefighters refusing to build fire lines downhill no matter what safety measures were taken (Maclean, 1999). There was a movement among the firefighting teams to challenge the old authoritarian ways of managing fire teams. The group that eventually developed the curriculum Mission Centered Solutions (MCS) is an organization run by retired Special Forces operatives. The curriculum delivery by this group is set mainly in the classroom using PowerPoint presentations and includes an overnight scenario that oft times is set in the parking lot of the building where they are doing the training. In this program, there are 32 hours of leadership curriculum that need to be delivered and the course is necessary to move to the next level.

The format NOLS has developed, within the constraints imposed, is a curriculum based on a 7-day, backcountry plan. What emerges is that the NOLS course is more expensive. It requires more time and a participant who is fit. One additional constraint playing into all of this is that participants graduate as long as they have attended the course. Knowing that they only need to attend to have the box checked "graduate" does not translate necessarily to a greater ability, competency, or ability to engage in novel approaches to complex field firefighting situations.

### **Reflection and Sense Making at Little Pines Col**

The goal of this L380 is to teach leadership to the participant. I am going to refer to a few selected writers who represent the current mainstream or dominant way of approaching and looking at leadership. I argue that in these books, the approach to leadership stems one from an underlying humanistic psychology approach. Some of the key areas emphasized are the importance of personal responsibility, free will, and



self-actualization—followed by an examination of these key areas from a rationalist causality of certainty (Stacey, 2010, 2007).

The work of Michael Useem in *The Leadership Moment* (Useem, 1998) takes up Wagner Dodge's experiences at the Man Gulch Fire. Useem uses the narrative in that chapter to draw a number of conclusions in regards to leadership. He is choosing to make sense of and offer a series of conclusions from a vantage point almost 50 years out from the event. His takeaway points for a leaders are: a) If you have made several problematic decisions in a row, be prepared to have your leadership questioned; b) If you want trust and compliance when the need for them cannot be fully explained, explain yourself early; c) If you expect those who work for you to exercise their own judgment, provide them with the decision making experience now; d) If you have difficult decisions to make and insufficient time to explain them, a key to implementation may be loyal allies who are sure to execute them through thick and thin; e) If your organization is facing a period of uncertainty, change, or stress, now is the time to build a strong culture with good lines of interior communication, mutual understanding, and shared obligation (Useem, 1998).

Man Gulch occurred on August 5, 1949. The smoke jump team landed at 16:10, gathered their chutes and gear and headed out at 17:00. By 17:56, based on the melted hands of James O. Harrison's wristwatch, 13 of the 16-man team were either dead or dying from their burns. Robert Sallee and Walter Rumsey survived by running up the side of the gulch and finding an un-vegetated, rock slide field. As the team of firefighters ran up the gulch, the fire followed them 4-5 miles an hour faster than a regular forest fire. (The reason for the increased speed was the fact that the gulch was in a transitional zone and there was a fair amount of dry prairie grass.) A prairie grass fire moves faster and burns hotter than a regular forest fire. Dodge and his team knew they were in trouble as they discarded their gear and scurried as fast as they could up the gulch. At this point the flames are 200-300 feet high, the roar of the burning fire and the convection of the air are deafening, the sap in the trees is superheating and exploding all around them and the air is redolent with swirling ash, smoke and ambers. Somehow at 17:45 (one minute before the fire overtakes the team), "On the open slope ahead of the timber Dodge was lighting a fire in the bunch grass with a 'gofer' match" (Maclean, 1993, p. 74). Dodge then entered the backfire

burn area. He called out and gesticulated to his crew to join him; none did (Maclean, 1993, Useem, 1998, Rothermel, 1993).

The narrative of this event is similar in many ways to a short story by Edgar Allen Poe, “A Descent into the Maelstrom” (Poe, 1975), and how Elias then takes up Poe’s story as an analogy in *Involvement and Detachment* (1987). The brief Poe narrative tells of two brothers in a fishing boat off the coast of Scandinavia. The boat gets caught in a maelstrom—a water vortex that sucks all objects to the bottom—and they are terrified. Despite the life threatening circumstances, one brother is able to look at the water vortex and in the same instance recall the damaged and undamaged jetsam he used to see cast ashore from past maelstroms during his after-storm, shoreline walks. He is able to connect that information to his present circumstance. He realizes that the small round barrels are not descending as fast as other debris and as he leaps from the boat onto a floating barrel, he urges his brother to join him. His brother does not leave the boat and dies in the maelstrom. The surviving brother was able, even in his deep and dangerous involvement, to become somewhat detached and envisage a possible novel way of saving himself. Elias takes this idea from Poe and argues that we are always involved and detached (or immersed and abstracting) and that this is a chronic paradoxical state. The connection that I am making, and that the reader will experience as this narrative continues, is that this is a critical practice and method for leaders and decision makers.

Dodge is confronted with the same picture and same environmental stressor that the rest of his team is facing; however, even as he is deeply immersed in his own survival and that of his team, he is able to become detached enough to come up with the inspiration to light a backfire. In 1949, this was a novel, totally improvised idea. No one in the 40 years of USFS firefighting had done something like this—no one had thought of it. Here in this maelstrom in Man Gulch, Dodge came up with this novel and lifesaving idea. The issue is that none of his team is able to become detached enough to see what he sees and to then join him in the burnt out area. They all continue to run up the gulch away from the fire that is moving faster than they are. Here is how Rumsey made sense of what was happening:

Dodge’s fire did not disturb Rumsey’s fixation. Speaking of Dodge lighting his own fire, Rumsey said, “I remember thinking that that was

a very good idea, but don't remember what I thought it was good for.... I kept thinking the ridge—if I can make it. On the ridge I will be safe.” (Maclean, 1993, p. 74)

This is similar to the circumstances of the two brothers in Poe's maelstrom story: one can see an alternative escape from their terrible circumstances while the younger brother cannot bring himself to join his elder brother in the 'new' survival method. The part Elias picks up on, and then uses as an analogy, is the elder brother's ability to be involved in the maelstrom and at the same time to detach or abstract himself from the life-threatening situation to make sense of what he might do. The second element embedded in the story is about time: past, present and future. As the elder brother is making sense of what is going on around him, he recollects past walks on the beach and his observations of the flotsam and jetsam deposited on the shore after other storms. What he remembers is that some debris is shattered into unrecognizable pieces while some remains unharmed and intact. It is this connection—an observation made in his past linked to what he is experiencing in the present—that allows a different future to emerge. I would argue that the involvement and detachment we experience in our daily interactions and the sense making that arises (allowing for novel ways of dealing with choices and decisions) is underpinned by a concept of time called “the living present” which I will expand upon later in this paper. Sallee and Rumsey survived by engaging in the practice they had been taught—outrun the fire and get to the safety of the ridge. The other thirteen members of their team were not as fortunate.

There are two aspects that I want to take up from *Involvement and Detachment* (Elias, 1987), the first is as a way of understanding one's practice of leading and the second is a critique of Useem's approach to making sense of what happened and how all of this is linked back to these firefighters I am camped with on Little Pines Col. Arguing my point about the idea of involvement and detachment, I am going to use the word abstract, because I think it more closely describes what we are actually engaged in. If we are attentive to our day-to-day interactions, we cannot help but be involved—we are in them. There are then moments, as we are involved, that we abstract to make sense of what is happening. The iteration of the involvement and abstraction are happening at the same time. We continued to be involved as we make

sense and our sense making continues to change as we are involved and the iteration continues. All of this is happening in the living present as we are gesturing to others involved in our day-to-day interactions. Part of the challenge is to work with individuals in a group so that they are aware that this is actually occurring both consciously and unconsciously, and, further, how they can open to the novel ideas that might arise out of their sense making.

In recent conversations with colleagues, these two questions arose: 1) “Are you talking about being fully present?” and 2) “Is this an aspect of differentiation?” I found myself responding that since I believe we are always immersed in our day-to-day activities, how can we be fully present with what is happening? Continuing in the sense making we are engaged in—especially with the interplay of memories, fantasies, and anxieties about the future and so on—how can we be fully present with what is happening? As for differentiation, this conjured up a spatial analogy about boundaries between and among individuals. If I am making sense of what is occurring with complex responsive processes of relating, the *me* and *I* are constantly being informed and formed by the social interaction that I am immersed in and abstracting from in the “living present.” This is also what is going on for each person involved in this leadership expedition and in organizational life. This is why I am making this connection between immersion and abstraction and using the living present as an understanding of time.

The second aspect of Useem’s book is that he is choosing to make sense of this event from a rationalist causality of certainty and a systems thinking approach. In choosing this approach I think he misses this involvement and detachment aspect of leading which led Dodge to a novel solution. Part of the issue becomes how do you train team members to engage in this way of thinking and, more critically, what needs to happen for the moment of leadership to be translated into individuals embarking on the novel solution?

In addition, Useem’s book invites a look at other books and articles on leading. James MacGregor Burns’ *Leadership* (1978) takes a political view of what leadership is and creates the distinction of transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Abraham Zaleznik’s article *Managers and Leaders: Are They Different* (1977) created the break and/or distinction between managing and

leading. John Kotter's *What Leaders Really Do* (1990) built on this distinction and both are based on a system outlook of running an organization. Simply put, the organization is seen as a system which is a second order abstraction (Stacey, 2010). It is then interpreted and acted out as if it was real. Based on this, managers and leaders are both inside the system and outside the system orchestrating and moving it. And when they are outside, they are able to have an unbiased view of what is happening. As I have argued above, we are always involved so I would hold that this ability to be outside or inside something is merely a spatial analogy that no longer works for me.

*The Leadership Challenge* (Kouzes and Posner, 2002) is mainly their view of making sense of leading in an organization that is seen as a system. *Primal Leadership* (Goleman et al., 2002) uses a scientific and data driven approach to make sense of leading and, again, the underlying premises are a rationalist causality of certainty and systems view of human organizations. There are a number of works looking at the current financial crisis; for example, the article by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky *Managing in a (Permanent) Crisis* (Heifetz et al., 2009a) and their new book *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Heifetz et al., 2009b). Heifetz et al use different language for their description that is based in system thinking and a rationalist causality of certainty. What I am illustrating here is that these are some of the major writers of the past 40 years who are referred to as sources for making sense of leading. And all of them are operating from the same underlying causality in how they think about human organizations and abstract models.

There are two major areas of causality. The first is a causality of certainty, which comes out of the work of Kant. Kant made three distinctions: efficient (if-then) and formative (already enfolded in the organism) causalities applying to the natural world and rationalist (free will and the observer can choose) causality as applying to human action. The second is a causality of uncertainty emerging from the work on chaos models, models of dissipative structures and complex adaptive systems. The two identified here are adaptationist and transformative causalities of uncertainty. What I will be focusing on is the rationalist causality of certainty and the transformative causality of uncertainty and how I think they might contrast in connection with current leadership, decision making and communication methodologies. Connecting

them to the above-listed distinctions between rationalist causality of certainty and transformative causality of uncertainty will help to clarify my line of reasoning.

What are the differences between a rationalist and a transformative approach? If I thought what was happening between human beings was a rationalist approach to leading, decision making and communication, I would be thinking of it in the following ways: a) moving towards the future goals are chosen by reasoning and autonomous humans—the designated leader and the group; b) the designated leader and the group work at realizing the chosen goals; c) the process has an underpinning of human reason and ethical universals; d) the change occurs because the decision making process has been designed by rational choice to get it right; and e) freedom and constraints in the relationship occur through reason.

On the other hand if I thought what was happening between human beings was a transformative approach to leading and decision making, I would be thinking of it in the following ways: a) movement towards the future is being perpetually constructed by the movement itself as continuity and transformation, the known and unknown, at the same time by both the designated leader and the group; b) in the leader/group relationship there is movement that expresses continuity and transformation of individual and collective identity; c) the process of movement that the leader and group experience resides in their local interactions forming and being formed by population-wide patterns; d) change for the leader/group occurs through diverse micro interactions and escalation of small changes; and e) in the leader/group relationship both freedom and constraint arise in spontaneity and diversity of micro interactions. (Adapted from (Stacey, 2010), p. 67.)

The next section of narrative further illustrates the thinking above and the ongoing complexities of the micro interactions between human beings.

### **Traveling from Little Pines Col to Pine Valley**

The day starts at 06:00. It is that moment of penumbra right before the sun makes its appearance. As light illuminates the valley, Pacific coast fog banks and low clouds roll inland—up and over the ridgelines in a symphony of movement. The morning activities involve preparing and eating breakfast, breaking camp, pack packing and, once we are all ready, a briefing by the two leaders of the day (LOD). Today it is Andres Orozco-Jaramillo and Shane Bender. These two leaders could not

be more different. Andres is of Hispanic heritage. He grew up in South Central Los Angeles, survived the madness by being a gang member and was able through the fire service apprentice program to change the trajectory of his life. Shane grew up in the American Midwest, graduated from university and is looking for the opportunity to lead his own team this summer. Andres and Shane deliver the briefing for the day finishing with the assessment that it all looks fairly straightforward. The straightforward part catches my attention because every time I hear that word the day turns from clear-cut to a complicated epic. Chris and Leonard are traveling with Andres' group and I am traveling with Shane's group.

The first part of the day plays out as planned. And then the bad weather from the Pacific rolls in. A constant drizzle turns into rain and the temperature drops—ideal conditions for hypothermia. Shane's group reaches the saddle above Pine Valley at 13:30. As per the briefing early that morning, this is where the two groups are supposed to rendezvous and make the decision about descending into the valley or continuing up over the ridge that rises from the saddle another 2000 ft. We look around the saddle and the other group is not to be found. Our group members call out. No response. We break up into scouting groups, one heading up the ridge one heading down into the valley. By this time, the drizzle has turned to a steady rain and the temperature is in the low 40s. We have left 'straightforward' behind.

Eventually we establish that Andres' group is about 900 feet above us on the ridge. Shane brings our group together. We get our packs and move up the ridge to rendezvous with Andres' group. As they wait for our arrival, they set up a tarp in an attempt to stay dry. My colleague Chris stands under his open golf umbrella. I check in with Chris and he explains how Andres' group was not paying attention to the maps and they missed the saddle. How did that happen? The saddle is a major and very obvious physical feature. From a terrain standpoint, you have to descend down into the saddle and then ascend up and out of it. This particular group ascended out and up 900 feet.

The two groups come together. Andres and Shane speak. And then they spend the next 40 minutes in a discussion with the whole group as to what they should do now. Chris and I stand there and observe getting more humid and cooler as we watch the student become wetter and colder. It appears, as we listen to the process, that

Andres and Shane are attempting to create a consensus decision and it is not working. Chris and I check in and decide we needed something to happen soon as the temperature was continuing to drop. I step in and ask, “So how is this working for all of you?” With intermittent groans, I heard a probing reply, “This is not working.” It was followed by the inevitable inquiry, “What would you do?” I said, “Well, if I was on a personal trip in this weather I would be back at the road head sitting in my car with the heat on.” We all had a light laugh. I ask them to think about what is going on with the group, the deteriorating weather conditions, where they can set up shelter and so on. Then I step back out of the conversation. A number of strong voices state objections to camping in the saddle because of the presence of snags. However, with the eventual consent of the objectors, the decision was finally made to return to the saddle and camp.

When we arrive at the saddle, Andres and Shane are looking a little weary from the process and there are many very wet and cold people. Then, just as everybody is taking their packs off, Robert, Jeremy and Dan declare that they are not going to camp on the saddle because of the snags. They announce that they are going to scout out to the west along the slope of the ridge. The group is immobilized again—not knowing if they are going to move again or set up camp. It takes about 25 minutes for them to come to the conclusion that camping on the western slope of the ridge is a really bad idea. We set up camp: prepare hot drinks, cook some food and get people to change into warm, dry clothes. The rain abates for a while. It is dark by the time everybody is fed. Chris and I decide that we need to do two individual group debriefings and then we will bring the two groups together to debrief the larger, unified group. An aspect of the learning is to examine how we are functioning and making sense as the environmental conditions deteriorate, as our physical capacity is being challenged by low energy and as our patience wanes. The AARs (debriefings) are not as fruitful as we would have liked and we use this factor to illustrate how this is actually the most critical time to be engaged in our best practice. Chris and I finish with the large group and plan a meeting in the morning to revisit the AARs.

The night is punctuated by heavy rains and wind. We wake to a steady drizzle. We meet the next morning and check in as a group. Andres and Shane want to revisit what happened the day before; they are perplexed. They followed what they had



learned about decision making and yet some members of the group chose to do something different once we got to the col. A lively discussion ensues and the participants struggle to connect what they had been taught with what actually happened. I think that what started to emerge for them was that decision making and communication are not linear nor are they dyadic in how they are actually experienced. So what had we taught them? I will briefly take up two curriculum pieces on communication and two on decision making.

We taught the Interpersonal Gap Model (Wallen, 1968) and the Awareness Wheel (Wallen, 1968). Both of these models ascribe to a linear format of sender receiver, the underlying belief that there is a correct way of doing this, and that one of the parties is either not sufficiently disclosing or, in some way, they have not been clear about their intent or the impact the communication is having on them. For decision making we taught decision-making styles and a matrix on how to choose a decision-making style based on Hershey and Blanchard's work (1963). This matrix has a first level cybernetics set up (qualifying if followers are able—if 'yes' do this and if 'no' do this—and so it cascades down through the matrix). Two articles from *MIT Sloan Management Review* support this type of approach and understanding of decision making (Mintzenberg and Westley, 2001, Messick and Bazerman, 1996). What I am pointing out here is that what we have taught is in keeping with the mainstream understanding of communication and decision making as a component of a leadership-training program. Based on this type of content, the participants come away thinking: that they have done something wrong or have not used the models correctly. What I would advocate is that if they are able to make sense of their experience from the vantage point of complex responsive processes, and they are looking at this from a transformative causality of uncertainty (see Chapter Three), they might have a different experience in the domains of communication and decision making, which offers them the capacity to experience these micro interactions in a more novel way. This way of making sense of what is happening is also underpinned by a different understanding of time, which I will take up in the next section.

### **The Living Present as an Understanding of Context**

One of the taken-for-granted understandings of time is based on the idea that it is composed of a past, a present and a future. This general understanding sets up time

as a linear progression in which we are in the “here and now” and we need to be “present” with what is happening. This type of thinking sets up time as a series of here-and-now points—each is a sort of rest stop in life’s timeline which allows us to sit and look at the past and the future as they exist on either side of our here-and-now chair. This linear/spatial understanding of time can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Physics* with the notions of “now”, the “point”, the “limit” and the “circle.” In his look at time, Aristotle took a linear mathematical approach to formulate his explanation. I would argue that today our interpretation and sense making around time is still so. This concept was originally challenged by Husserl (1991) who developed an argument for an understanding of time based on one inner time consciousness: time flowed and that present, past and future are impacted by each other in this flow and our own pre-reflective self-awareness and intentional consciousness. It is here that the term “Living Present” first emerges. Derrida criticized Husserl work in *Speech and Phenomena* (1973) and generally took a position that Husserl was too focused on the intra-person’s experience of time. I think that Husserl was starting at the intrapersonal level as a way of grasping the phenomenon of time and moved it to the interpersonal or social.

So why is this important and what is the connection? Peter Drucker places a weight of importance on time and decision making in his book *Technology, Management and Society* (2004). He sees decision making as synchronizing a number of divergent time spans into one present and he goes on to state that decisions only exist in the present. This view of time and decision making is in keeping with a rationalist causality of certainty. So who else has written about time and the different way of making sense of it? A.N. Whitehead took up the issue of time and its temporal and social nature in a number of his books. His work was built upon by G.H. Mead in *The Philosophy of the Present* (1934). It is also explored by William James in his *Essays on Pragmatism* (1948). Their sense making looks at how the present is not a point in time, rather it is being created by our past as we experience it in the present while allowing the future to emerge which impacts our iterations of the past and how we continue to experience the emergent present. The present is enabled and constrained by our iterations of our past and the future we are creating in our ongoing micro interactions, which lead to population-wide patterns, which then impact the

micro interactions we are engaged in. In developing the work of Mead, D. Griffin (2002), R. Stacey (2003, 2010, 2007) and P. Shaw (2002) take up time and the idea of the “living present” and work at contextualizing it to our day-to-day activities and making sense of it from that standpoint. The thread of the argument here is to make sense of our experience of time in a different way—from a temporal standpoint as Husserl first took it up and as Mead then further expounded upon it. The idea being that the future is constantly emerging in the present in our ongoing day-to-day interactions and that “the forming present, to signify the time structure of forming while being formed at the same time as the inclusion of the past and the future in the experience of the present” (Griffin, 2002, p. 169). I would argue that when we make sense of decision making and communication from a standpoint of the living present it gives us a more satisfying way of making sense of the ongoing interactions that occur in decision making and the possibility of the novel outcomes that might emerge from the gestures that we call decision making.

I would further argue that the living present and transformative causality of uncertainty leads us to a very different place of making sense of leading, communication and decision making and, if this is how we choose to make sense of what is happening in Big Sur, I think it challenges us to approach teaching this in a very different way. What would that look like? I would argue it is working at understanding one’s practice. How do I/we think and make sense of what we are doing? How, as Foucault talked about practice, do we engage in critique—not the idea of finding something wrong with what we are doing, but rather questioning our day-to-day practice so that the next time we are not able to engage in it the same way? Dewey takes up this issue in *Experience and Nature* ([1925]1958):

There is then an empirical truth in the common opposition between theory and practice, between the contemplative, reflective type and the executive type, the “go getter,” the kind that “gets things done.” It is, however a contrast between two modes of practice (p. 314).... One lives on a conscious plane; thought guides activity, and perception is its reward. Action is not suppressed but is moderated (p. 315).

It is this grasping that theory and practice are interwoven, not separate, and our reflecting, thinking and making sense of our day-to-day practice that is the critical part of the learning process for these firefighters.

### **Ideology and Power**

I want to take a brief look at power and ideology and how this impacts the curriculum, how it is delivered and how the outcomes might not be what people really want. What needs to be look at first is the ideology of military competency. In the March 22<sup>nd</sup> issue of *Fortune*, the magazine's cover story was titled "Meet the New Face of Business Leadership" (2010). This lead article, as well as the bulk of the issue, was devoted to military training, its development of "leaders" and how, as they leave the military, major U.S. corporations are recruiting them. The article makes the connection that being in control of 20-40-60 people is a demonstration of one's capacity to lead and manage individuals in an organization. This, I would argue, is the dominant way of thinking about the military: competent, runs logistics well, can organize and deploy personnel and material. What they seem to miss, however, is a lack of creative and novel approaches to issues: the level of incompetency producing the levy breaches in New Orleans (U.S. Army Core of Engineers) and the ongoing mismanagement of the reconstruction, the disastrous aftermath of Operation Desert Storm for the Iraqi civilian population, and the mismanagement of the detention centers in Iraq and Afghanistan, to name a few recent examples.

Norman Dixon takes this up in his book *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (1976). After reviewing many examples of military incompetence, he offers a psychological review of 11 areas he thinks can foster military ineptitude starting with the lack of intellectual ability of senior commanders. Dixon's list continues with how military organizations have a tendency to attract people with particular defects in intellect and personality; the ongoing "bullshit;" the psychology around socialization and the anal character along with it; the impact of character and honor; and leading men as constraining psychology (which plays into a level of anti-effeminacy, irrational authoritarianism and a cult of muscular Christianity). Finally, there is the inability to process information unless it is available to them visually. What Dixon is driving at is, as an organization, the military has a tendency to drive out or not even recruit individuals who might be more willing to engage in new and

novel ways and that the leaders it does produce lack the level of competency that is ascribed to them.

To illustrate that Dixon's work of 34 years ago is still relevant, I will refer to two recently published articles. The first is by Bruce Fleming, an English professor at the U.S. Naval Academy, who wrote an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* entitled "The Academies' march toward mediocrity" (Fleming, 2010). The second is an article appearing in *Army Times* on September 5, 2010, entitled "The PowerPoint rant that got a Colonel fired." (2010, September 5) Both articles confirm that what Dixon wrote back then (and although based mainly on the British military) also holds true today for the American military. I would argue that the level of military blunder and incompetency are overlooked and what is presented and accepted as part of the dominant interpretation is a level of competency and ability at developing novel ways of dealing with uncertainty. With the ideology that is espoused and followed in the military, I would argue that in actuality it is based on a rationalist causality of certainty that leads to a mirage of freedom of thinking. It is based on reason that is constrained by ethical universals. Why am I making this point? Because the training resources for this program have generally come out of the military and the firefighting organizational structure models a military model. I would further argue that this model does not open up the learning possibilities around looking at method (the method of leading) or leading (the practice of leading). I will take both these up (Method and Practice) in the next section after a quick reflection on poison oak.

### **A Final Look at Poison Oak**

We have taken a layover day that is not a part of the very structured and strict schedule. It has made a difference in how the firefighters are working together. It has given them time to reflect, to think about and make sense of their experience thus far. It is ironic to me because layover days are a critical part of a NOLS learning experience while it is missing from this schedule. What I am experiencing now with this group reinforces in my mind *why* that time for reflection is so important.

The new leadership team is having a discussion on what route to follow. There are three options: up over the ridge, down into pine valley or retracing the route we have just traveled. The part of the discussion that catches my attention is whether or not to descend into the valley; the major concern of all involved is the amount of

poison oak that will be present. They do not want to risk exposure necessitating a steroid shot, which will then reduce the number of shots they can have during the fire season. The choice is made to stay above the 2300 ft. elevation limit for poison oak and to retrace our original route. I just found it fascinating that all of the participants had the same level of concern about poison oak as I did and yet it remained a hidden part of their personal agenda—as if acknowledging this information to the group would have a negative impact on their professional image.

## **Conclusion**

### **Method and Practice.**

Method in its simplest version is how we go about making sense. In other words, what we base sense making on and what we then put into practice in our day-to-day activities are the ‘how’ of method. The method I have touched on throughout this project is a look at how we think and how we make sense of what we are engaged in.

This brings me back to Foucault and his distinction concerning critique and the ability to look at our day-to-day interactions (question them, look at our own thinking so that we are no longer able to engage, and think about what we have just made sense of in the same way). It also elicits my earlier quote from Dewey and the connection he makes between theory and practice: they are not separate, but are actually embedded in each other. Theory emerges out of practice and practice emerges out of theory—there is an ongoing iteration, a movement that plays out. Dewey goes on to state:

When he perceives clearly and adequately that he is within nature, a part of its interactions, he sees that the line to be drawn, is not between is not between action and thought, or action and appreciation, but between blind, slavish meaningless action and action that is free, significant, directed and responsible.... All reason which itself reasoned, is thus method, not substance; operative not “end in itself.”

(Dewey, [(1925)1958], p. 435)

I would argue, based on the method and practice of the dominant conversation in which the military resides, that what is being delivered by the military will continue to

offer the Inter-Agency Wildland Firefighters outcomes that are not satisfying and/or what they want. What they are actually looking for is a different outcome and yet, with the inherent power structure and ideology in place, they will continue to get generally similar outcomes—outcomes that are constrained by a rationalist ideology.

What are the Wildland Firefighters looking for? Based on my conversations, I would argue that they are looking to move to a transformative experience where individuals are aware of the freedoms and constraints arising in the living present in their micro interactions of decisions they are making while, at the same time, they are leading during complex, emergent and dynamic fire events. This is reflected in the above narrative of the conversation that occurred on whether or not to cross the snag field and then to again retrace their steps through the same snag field to avoid and/or minimize contact with poison oak. And it is also reflected in the narrative regarding where to camp on the saddle that third night with all its subsequent conversations and decisions amid compounding rain, cold and the physical drain of a long hiking day. These were neither scenarios nor sandbox mock-ups. They were actual situations that the participants found themselves in and, not only did they have to make decisions, they also had to make sense of their experience. These narratives illustrate the ongoing interplay of freedoms and constraints that are arising in the living present between individual human agents in their micro interactions of the decisions they are making while leading in complex, emergent and dynamic wilderness travel.

### **Concluding Reflection**

The questions that I raised in this narrative focus on how leadership development is used in organizations as a platform for change and how the development is based on models and theories that are a reification of past sense making of day-to-day interactions in organizations. I have sought to create an understanding of practice and method and how we make sense of this in the day-to-day iterations of ongoing change within organizations. To help me examine this subject matter, I looked at the current mainstream literature on leading and explored involvement and detachment in our day-to-day interactions. I looked at our present understanding of time and how we might experience time differently, ideology, power and poison oak. The link to my understanding of practice and method, and how this is generalizable, is the realization that in working with our method and practice we

influence and impact our clients and colleagues and we actively engage in the day-to-day change that is constantly being iterated in the micro interactions in which we are involved.

In addition, what emerged in this narrative is the ongoing struggle and difficulty groups are involved in when making sense of and reflecting on what is happening, how it is happening and why it is happening. The reason this difficulty is present, I would argue, is due to the underpinning rationalist causality of certainty, our linear concept of time and that we take these ideas for granted and do not choose to examine or think about the implications that are embedded in this way of making sense of our interactions. The premise is that the leader and group will develop rational decisions that will lead the group (including the leader) to get it right at this very moment in time. It can lead to outcomes that are confusing for the leader and the group because their focus is on the idea that there *must* be a right answer as opposed to the possibility that there *might* be multiple answers. Some answers are more satisfying than others; for example, the third-day-in-the-rain decision to first camp in the saddle after which some group members decided to start scouting for a different place to camp. The leader and some group members in the debrief wondered how they got it wrong.

Another way of making sense of this is to take up transformative causality of uncertainty. We can both experience what the local interactions occurring between the group members and the leader are and understand how they are experiencing this in the living present, which brings together both their need to establish shelter and deal with their concern for deadfall. In approaching leading, decision making and communication in this manner, participants are allowed the opportunity for a novel way of starting to make sense of their interactions.

The struggle for both leaders and group members in making sense of their interactions and in talking about them is underpinned by the key aspect of rationalist causality: the belief that what we are doing is designed by us using rational choice to get it right. To 'get it right' we must have some outcome in mind and that it is the correct outcome. What I have argued is that leaders and group members are constantly enabling and constraining each other in the decision-making process experienced as a series of local interactions, which leads to some agreement on a decision and might be



impacted as it is functionalized by another series of constraining and enabling micro interactions leading to small changes. As the interactions and decisions pattern themselves out, there is an ongoing interplay of freedom and constraints for both the leader and the group members. I think this was amply illustrated by the camping dilemma on the third day and the freedom and constraining that took place as the group worked at remaking the decision.

In the end what ties this all together for me is paying attention to practice (the day-to-day interactions I am involved with) and method (how I think and make sense of the practice I am involved in). I would argue that this is the critical underpinning to leadership development and to the development of myself as a practitioner and, finally, that it is generalizable to my colleagues in leadership development both in an experiential expedition setting and in organizational development consulting.

In the next chapter I will explore leading as a practical activity in leadership development. Based on the narratives, I want to explore and reflect on the thinking around the ideas of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1968, Weick, 2001, 1993), metis (Scott, 1999), phronesis (Flyvbjerg, 2001), and how these disparate ideas connect with an iterative process of reflection/reflexive thinking that is embedded in our ongoing process of sensemaking and making sense.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Project 4, July 2011

#### Leading as a Practical Activity in Leadership Development

##### Introduction

In Project Three I continued to explore concepts and ideas that I thought were not being taken up in the domains of leadership development, leadership coaching and leadership education. At the end of Project Three and in my Progression Report, I wrote that I wanted to look at theory and practice in the domain of leading and how power plays an integral part in the ongoing functionalization of leadership development, coaching, education and writing.

Based on my narratives I want to explore and reflect on the thinking around the ideas of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1968, Weick, 2001, 1993), metis (Scott, 1999), phronesis (Flyvbjerg, 2001), cultural hegemony (Jones, 2006, Scott, 1990, Gramsci, 2011) and power (Gramsci, 2011, Faubion, 2000, Gramsci, 2000). In addition, the challenge encompasses the use of models/theories and how we are able to convey what a person is doing when leading. The models/theories I will be looking at are Root Cause Analysis (RCA) (Johnson, 1973), After Action Reviews (AAR) (Group, 2010) and Debriefs. I want to look at the idea of *how* our learning and application of the above models/theories can, at times, be more constraining than enabling and what some of the reasons might be for this circumstance.

What ties these disparate ideas together is how we engage in the process of reflection and reflexive thinking. There is an iterative process of reflection/reflexive thinking that is embedded in our ongoing process of sensemaking and making sense. It is this iterative process, which has an impact on practice and how our thinking moves, that offers both the practitioner and client the opportunity for novel approaches.

Additionally does a dominant group of writers exercise hegemony over the concept of leadership? This question arises as the patterns of interaction in the narrative are examined and the same patterns iterate themselves unchallenged. There is a built in aspect of taken-for-granted language/expressions that are used, but not reflected upon. Inherent in this circumstance there is a pattern of rote behavior that

emerges. It is this hegemonic layering and belief in “Technical Rationality” as an underpinning to current concepts in leadership development that will be explored within the context of how this might be questioned through reflection/reflexive thinking in the day-to-day practice of coaching and consulting

### **Getting in Front of the Decision or how do Decisions Emerge?**

This past fall I worked with and coached a business group manager for NRG Energy. Dave oversaw nine power plants located throughout the northeast United States. These plants are old, coal-fired plants that have been converted to natural gas or have been retrofitted with updated gas technology. The context of these plants is that they need to be available for power production when called on by the electric grid management. They are basically paid to be on standby and the historical call usage has only been 3 to 6 days a month mainly during the summer. If they are not available for what they have agreed to provide, a fine is levied on the plant. So based on the usage and revenue, all nine plants had just gone through a Human Capital Adjustment based on market conditions. They basically had a work force reduction through attrition, retirement and layoffs. All of this was implemented in the spring of 2010 and was finalized the first week of June. Each plant saw a reduction of workforce from 30-50%. Starting in the third week of June a heat wave hit the northeastern states and did not abate until mid-August. This meant that the electric grid needed extra capacity and for 8 weeks these standby plants were online—56 days of continuous operation. While trying to meet the agreed power-generation commitment during this period, staff complaints of being overworked amplified, near misses occurred and reportable injuries increased. It was in this context that I was hired in August to work with Dave as his coach.

Here is a recent coaching conversation with Dave who began by saying, “I need to get out in front of the decisions.” I normally would have started brainstorming with the client on how he could do this; in actuality, I just sat there for a moment with an amazed expression on my face. Dave asked if everything was all right. Saying that I was fine, I asked, “Could you please narrate for me how you get in front of a decision?” The client stared back blankly and then said, “Well, you know, get *in front* of the decision.” We spent the next 20 minutes in conversation while I shared with him how I made sense of the spatial metaphor that he had just used and how I

experience decision making as a series of social interactions that lead to something emerging called a decision. I continued our conversation by admitting to him that I was having difficulty making sense of how a person could physically or metaphorically get in front of something that is emerging. The client sat there for a minute, thought about it and then asked if we could go on with this conversation. The conversation continued to explore our understanding of time, emergence and our lack of questioning those taken-for-granted business/management sound bites, such as “getting in front of decisions,” “buy in,” “empowerment,” and so on.

There is an aspect of the taken-for-granted sensemaking that plays itself out in organizations that accepts a status quo of the practice and method. I want to make sense of the implication to my work and for my client as Foucault (2000) created the distinction between critique (meaning the sensemaking of one’s day-to-day interactions so that one is unable to engage in the same actions the same way the next time) and criticism (which is about there being a right way and wrong way of doing something or of making sense of experience). The latter has a tendency to close down a conversation while the former has the potential to open the conversation.

In thinking about this interaction I would like to start with the distinction that Flyvbjerg offers based on Aristotle’s work and his engagement with *phronesis* as practical knowledge, which goes beyond *episteme* as analytical and scientific knowledge and *techne* as technical knowledge or know-how (2001). It is this idea of practical knowledge that is also taken up by Dewey ([1925]1958), Elias (1978, 1991, [1939] 2000), Chia and Holt (2006), Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) and Burkitt (1999) that I think is an underpinning to understanding practice and method in a different way and thus leading. The connection to power, ideology and cultural hegemony is that in the current discourse most of the validations arise from a scientific or technical approach. Are there others ways of making sense of the human condition that are not steeped in the modernist and post-modernist traditions (Esade and McKelvey, 2010)? How are we able to research, understand, make sense of and argue for an additional domain of sensemaking that arises out of practical knowledge and taking our experience seriously? I think an aspect of the exploration lies in the ideas around complex responsive processes as a way of understanding our interactions and which I will explore after the next two brief narratives.

## **Safety or Risk and Declining Performance**

In late December and early January I received two phone calls from NRG asking if I would be willing to coach two of their general managers at the same time. I agreed to each of the requests. One manager was located just outside of Houston, Texas at a 3900-megawatt plant called W.A. Parish; the other manager was located at the Indian River plant in Delaware. I went through a very similar struggle as I related in project two of getting the involved parties lined up for a kick off meeting.

### **W.A. Parish Power Plant Visit #1**

I flew to Houston in early February to meet with Steve Hedges, the general manager of Parish, and Fran Sullivan, Vice President World Operation NRG. Steve's boss was not available due to the fact that there had been a restructuring and Steve's newly appointed boss was on vacation. The information that Fran shared with Steve and me was that Steve was on the fast track; he was one of three candidates for the next VP slot and that the coaching was part of Steve's development. The concerns Fran had were around the performance of the Parish plant: two key indicators were the increase in reportable injuries (they had doubled in the past years) and the five-year plan that Steve had developed for Parish. According to Fran that plan forecasted a decline in performance. I listened. I watched Steve. I listened. Having known Fran for three years now, I reflected that this was a narrative of broad-brush strokes and generalizations, and that if I wanted context and details they would come out in the coaching conversations with Steve and his direct reports. After about forty-five minutes Fran excused himself and Steve continued to chat with me for the next couple of hours. What I was looking for was context that did not seem very forthcoming. I left my meeting with Steve wondering what this relationship was going to look like. My characterization was that he was a male engineering manager, highly competent in this particular domain, stoic, loyal and holding the firm belief that working harder will solve whatever challenge is in front of him. Tomorrow I will head down to Parrish to start the 360 interviews.

It's 06:30 and I am on Route 59 going to Parrish, which is located about 25 miles southwest of Houston. The Parrish plant can generate 3900 megawatts of electricity. It has four coal-fired units, four gas-fired units and has about 390 employees and 100 contractors on site. I spend the next two days interviewing Steve's

direct reports and other key stakeholders. The theme of the interviews was to explore what patterns might arise and this was made easier by the fact that Steve had taken over this plant from Bob Osco about 15 months before. Since I am working with Steve on leading, a number of my questions were focused on how are Steve and Bob the same and how are their leadership styles different. What emerged from the interviews was a contrasting picture: Bob generally held very tight control on all aspects of the plant; decision making emanated from him and there was a right way and a wrong way to do it; most of the managers would wait for Bob to decide issues; and what happened inside the plant stayed inside the plant. Steve is aware of all aspects of plant operations and has been working with his management team to allow greater decision making at the unit operations level. What happens inside the plant is shared with the NRG community at large in the belief that there might be pertinent information throughout this community—the idea being to develop a community of practice. The view or narrative at the executive level is that Bob was a leader in control and the plant ran at a high efficiency level. There is, I would argue, an aspect of mythological hindsight occurring. Steve appears to be a little less in control mainly because more information is being shared. An example would be the number of near misses that are being reported at the plant. Steve and his management team have made a concerted effort to get individuals to more actively report near misses in the belief that this information offers the opportunity to improve plant safety and manage risk. The way it is being interpreted is that safety performance is declining because of the high number of near misses, especially when compared in hindsight to what Bob was allowing to be reported. What arises out of these 360 interviews are two contrasting ways of making sense of one's day-to-day experience, the emanating behavior and the leadership choices that are being made.

I have been with Steve and his managers for three days. I am immersed in their world. The plant is wrapped and unwrapped in a blanket of coastal fog and condensing clouds from the water towers. This is February in Texas and it is cold, windy, and wet. Steve and I walk from the main administration building to the big meeting hall to attend one of four crew safety meetings. (This will be repeated four times over the next couple of days so that each shift can participate.) I stand off to the side; there are about 100 men and women in attendance dressed in their Carhartt fire-

retardant clothing, steel-toe work boots, hard hats, eye protection, and gloves held next to them. The conversation has that slow, Texas-style western drawl and I reflect how I am such a contrast to them in my casual business dress, loafers and my east coast linguistic crispness. I further reflect on how we present ourselves to others and how others present themselves to us and how this can include/exclude, create insiders/outside and how, as I reflected, there is a conscious/unconscious aspect of my work where you know that I am an outsider and at the same time I am including myself in your day-to-day interactions (Goffman, 1959, Elias, 1965, 1987). After the meeting a catered lunch of fajitas is served.

Steve and I return to the administration building and I check in with him about how I am making sense of how Bob used to manage the plant. He confirms that the management of the plant was approached from a tight control, micro-management stance and that he has been working with his management team over the past year to slowly move more decision making out to the plant operations. We talk about the safety numbers—for 2010 the plant had 8 recordable injuries. The distinction between a near miss and a recordable injury is as follows: 1) a near miss is an injury that is mitigated and dealt with at the plant by the plant's first responders—such as an employee gets some type of debris in their eye; they go to a washing station; the eye is rinsed or a cotton swab is used and the offending object is removed; no further medical attention is needed and no prescription medication; 2) a recordable injury occurs when the employee needs medical attention above and beyond the first responder at the plant and some type of prescription medication is required and dispensed.

As we discussed the recordable injuries, I was also thinking that most of the employees had been at the plant for 20-25 years, meaning most of them are now in their mid- to late forties. As I reflected I asked how many of the recordable injuries fell into the athletic injury category (sprain and strain). Steve thought for a minute and said 5 of the 8 were athletic in nature. I pointed out to Steve that this type of context offers the possibility of thinking about the injury reporting differently. There is an aging population and there is a good chance you will have a higher frequency of these types of athletic injuries going forward, what can you do to manage the risk? What would stretching once or twice a day do? What would happen if you had a contract

with a massage therapy group? We continued to talk about safety. The reframe I suggested looked at risk and risk management. One of the distinctions I offered was around objective hazards (hazards that are present in the domain you are operating in, e.g., caustic materials, machinery, coal piles) and subjective hazards (hazards that are introduced by the human agents, e.g., schedule, impatient, immortality and so on) and that it is where these two intersect that the possibility of an accident resides. We finished the day and I drove back to Houston.

### **Indian River Power Plant and Thin Formulaic Generalizations**

A week later I was at the Indian River power plant for the kick off meeting for the coaching of the general manager of that plant in Delaware. The meetings went well; Fran seem to be generally jovial and relaxed. I finished up all the different interviews and discussions and was sitting in the conference room making notes. Fran walked in, closed the door and sat down. He started talking about Parish and their five-year business plan and how concerned he was that the plan forecasted declining performance. He wanted to know if I had looked at it. I said I had not and what I had looked at was the slide deck that Steve had prepared on current performance and especially the section on safety. Fran indicated that the safety number was an indicator to him of declining performance. I replied that I found it interesting that he made sense of it that way and offered that if you break out the recordable by injury type and connect with the context of an aging workforce there is the possibility of a higher injury rate in the future and that, especially in the domain of athletic injury, a more novel approach needs to be developed. Fran just sat there silently and then said, “Look at the five-year business plan. I am concerned. It plans for a declining performance.” Then he said goodbye and left.

What is important about this particular interaction and why have I included this interface? What I am illustrating and focusing attention on is the tendency of members within organizations to voice thin generalizations, which often go unchallenged and are habitually taken for granted as fact. Later in the narrative I will illustrate and take up this idea of thin formulaic generalization, as in the connection Scott (1999) makes in *Seeing Like a State*, and the importance of context and contextual knowledge.



These state simplifications, the basic givens of modern statecraft, were, I began to realize, rather like abridged maps. They did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted, nor were they intended to; they represented only that slice of it that interested the official observer. (Scott, 1999, p.3)

He goes on to say that he is not against bureaucratic planning of which simplification is a part rather he is making a case against a “hegemonic planning mentality that excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know how.” (Scott, 1999, p.6) he further explains what he thinks are the basic characters of thin formulaic generalizations in the context of state bureaucracy: 1) observation of only the aspect that are of official interest, 2) the accumulated information (written or numeric) is reported as documentary, 3) the facts are static, 4) the facts are aggregated and 5) the facts need to be aggregated and presented as averages to be able to generate standardized facts that can lead to a collective assessment. (Scott, 1999, p.80 paraphrased)

Scott’s quotes above, and description of the characteristic of thin formulaic simplification, are illustrated by the way safety and benchmarking are taken up throughout the narrative by the protagonist.

### **W.A. Parish Power Plant Visit #2 and the Context of Safety and Declining Performance**

This return visit to Parish involved following Steve for the next two days. I am basically shadowing him, attending each meeting he attends and throughout the day engaging with Steve and asking him about what was happening or, if I notice something, asking him about what might have been happening in that particular instance. All of this offers me as the consultant/coach context which I will talk about more later in this project on the importance of context and contextual knowledge (Scott, 1999). Morning starts off with a 07:30 teleconference where each power plant in the Texas fleet (coal, gas, oil, solar and wind) reports in on the past day’s performance, future planned performance and in the case of solid fuel plants (coal) the number of days of supply on hand, any near misses, any OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) recordable and any EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) violation. The whole management team is in attendance. The speaker is

-muted when they are not reporting and this basically allows for a secondary meeting to occur: checking-in, banter and staying up-to-date on one's PDA. This is followed by a meeting at 08:00 of the plant's management team starting off with a team member reading one of the safety rules. This practice is repeated daily cascading down through each team throughout the plant. What I notice both mornings is the cadence of the reader's voice—droll, matter of fact, as if someone is engaged in a rote exercise—in general, most of the participants take no notice of him as they look at their PDA's or shuffle through papers. Once the person is finished reading, the group launches into the meeting.

What registers with me is that if safety is so critical and they go through this exercise every day to highlight safety, what would happen if they stopped, reflected on what was just read, and spent some time in sensemaking as to why this safety rule is important? How do they, as a group, make sense each time of it and then through their own reflexiveness impact the practice at the plant? Or as queried by Bourdieu and Wacquant: “What does the return (*re-flectere means* ‘to bend back’) of science upon itself entail?” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.6) For me, it is this bending back that connects with how Bourdieu takes up reflexivity both as an aspect of the social and intellectual unconscious and as a collective enterprise. This further connects with certain aspects of Weick's look at sensemaking, which has embedded in it aspects of reflexivity, as does Schon's work in looking at how practitioners and clients can be reflective or, as he describes it, “reflection in action” (Weick, 1995, 2001, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007, Schon, 1983).

What I am experiencing is individuals moving from one task to the next, under the pressure of time and what I dub “the tyranny of now”—all requests from outside stakeholders need to be addressed immediately. I consistently check-in with my client population to see if “No” or “Can we negotiate that time frame?” are acceptable answers and the majority responds that those options are not generally available to them. What I then point out is that if ‘no’ has no value then ‘yes’ is close behind and both lose context and urgency. What I am pointing out here is the taken-for-granted nature that what is imagined, expected or functionalized is that ‘yes’ is the only available answer. And in the taken-for-granted nature of our day-to-day practice it goes unchallenged, not thought about and not made sense of in the context of the

interactions. I would argue that it is this capacity to think, reflect, critique and be reflexive that leads to the possibility of outcomes that might be novel or more satisfying to the participants. I will explore this capability as I take up a number of writers in the next reflection.

I shared this reflection with Steve and then we spend some time on his five-year plan. My question to him is that I want to understand why Fran interprets this plan as one of declining performance. His narrative follows: Originally when they put the plan together and explained the context of the plan, Fran thought that the plan made sense and basically approved it. It did show declining financial performance if you took a top line/bottom line view. This, I would argue, is taking a very generalized view (much like what is illustrated by the term “seeing like a state” (Scott, 1999) (see quote on page 13)) and not being attentive to context that is embedded within the five-year plan. The context of which is as follows: there are eight units and each of the units needs to be taken offline (scheduled outage) every 24 months for a maintenance overhaul. In this plan Steve and his team have extended the scheduled overhaul to every 30 months per unit while also building in some additional preventive maintenance checks. This generates a substantial savings over the five-year period. Furthermore, the Environmental Protection Agency has additional requirements around emissions, lead and other heavy metals coming online during this same five-year period. The new technology requirement costs exceed the savings realized. In addition, in 2008 NRG Energy made a decision to roll over non-critical maintenance to 2009 to increase cash flow. Parish pushed a major maintenance outage into the next fiscal year, resulting in the plant’s 2008 top performance statement—financially and from a generating standpoint. This benchmark year was also Bob’s final year as manager at Parish. In context this benchmark is an anomaly. The current five-year plan is benchmarked on NERC (North America Electric Reliability Corporation), GADS (General Availability Data System) and WEC (World Energy Council) data. If you take the data and contextualize it by fuel type, emissions controls, zonal, nodal and capacity markets, one can arrive at a reasonable context benchmark for the type of plant you are running. When this benchmark is arrived at it is lower than the 2008 plant benchmark. At the same time the benchmark being used is in the upper 2 percentile of the top quarter percentile. In other words the plan calls for performance

that matches or exceeds all other plants in the same category in North America. All of this was shared with Fran and he consequently approved Steve's five-year plan. It all changed when the Chief Operating Officer saw it and made just one comment, "This is a declining performance plan." From that point forward it has been characterized as a declining performance plan and every event at the plant is taken up and interpreted as reinforcing this view of declining performance. I am going to start with looking at bricolage, metis and phronesis as a way of making sense of the above narrative.

### **Bricolage, Metis and Phronesis**

In reflecting on this narrative I want to take up the analogy that Levy-Strauss originally developed in *The Savage Mind* (1968) of bricolage and the person that engages in this as the bricoleur. I intend to use this analogically as opposed to metaphorically and the distinction I am offering is the following:

"This differs from the metaphor in that it is the relationship without the attributes that are transferred. The analogical transfer, therefore, requires an act of interpreting the attributes of the entities in the relationship. This non transfer of attributes and the consequent need for careful translation is what distinguishes the analogical from the metaphorical transfer."

(Stacey, 2010, p.130)

I will be taking up and interpreting the attributes of bricolage and connecting them to my thinking and to the functionalizing of leadership development, and how this might connect to other writers and their thinking on this aspect of leading.

Levy-Strauss creates the distinction between the mind of a bricoleur and an ingenieur as a way of understanding how human agents relate to their context. The bricoleur has a deep connection to the concrete or the particular of their environment. This is illustrated by diligent observation, a thorough inventory of all elements in their surrounding environment, and an ability through a keen sense of understanding based on their particular environment. I would like to interject here and connect this with Scott's work in *Seeing Like a State* (1999) where he introduces the Greek term "metis" (meaning contextual knowledge) as I think this is closely linked with bricolage.

The ingenieur approaches the world, or the issue at hand, looking for resources that meet an exact design requirement. To meet these design requirements he will use

specific tools, machines, processes and materials which will yield something that is complete, which can operate independently of the designer, and which is replicable and is what his original design looked like (Levi-Strauss, 1968, Duymedjian and Ruling, 2010).

Levy-Strauss and subsequent writers who have taken up bricolage in organization focus on/and imply that the thinking of the bricoleur or ingenieur are happening singularly and separately. This separation and distinction does not accurately represent what might be happening as we think and process. I will seek to illustrate that we are processing information as both, that both the bricoleur and ingenieur are engaged at the same time and that it is in our sensemaking that we look at the outcome/artifact/product and conclude that the ingenieur was at work. A quick illustration from NASA- Apollo 13- one of the CO2 scrubbers has ceased to function, the astronauts needed to repair it with what they had in the capsule and lunar lander. This is a classic illustration of ingenieur- clearly understanding what the final product needs to do and bricoleur here is what I have to build it. I am illustrating this because in my experience as leaders/manager engages in sensemaking there is a tendency to focus on the artifact and sensemaking from a technical rationality standpoint. I will be arguing that these categories of thinking are happening at the same time as we are involved in our day-to-day interactions.

In the articles by Duymedjian and Ruling (2010) and Di Domenico et al., (2010) bricolage is taken up to help understand how it might fit into the sensemaking of organizations, social enterprises and entrepreneurship. The approach continues to be constrained by a focus on materials and output. The connection that I am making is that “the materials” are the thinking, the ideas, the sensemaking (as a retrospective narrative) and the making sense (as what is occurring in the interaction) that is taking place in the individual in connection with themselves and others. (I will elaborate on the distinction between sensemaking and making sense in Sensemaking and Making Sense section.) It is taking the ideas of Mead (1934) and Elias (1987, 1991, [1939] 2000) on how we emerge in the social interaction and how our mind emerges in the social and then connecting this process to the stored thinking, the experiences and the knowledge. What I am arguing is that there is a connection between the work of Mead, Elias and Scott. I will explore it further in my reflections.

My thinking around bricolage connects with the ideas that Scott (1999) takes up in his work *Seeing Like a State* in which he uses the title phrase “seeing like a state” as a way to capture the idea of generalized universal abstractions applied across wide populations. He examines various initiatives to better the human condition. Further, he investigates the scientific management of forestry, urban planning from Le Corbusier’s work, Brasilia, villagization in Tanzania, and Soviet collectivization of farming. What Scott argues is that many of these schemes are “thin formulaic simplifications” or, as captured in the title, “seeing like a state.” At the end of his work he takes up and explores the Greek word “metis” meaning contextual knowledge and how the lack of connecting the abstract schemes to the contextual knowledge of the area they were being deployed led to poor or negative outcomes—not really what the planners had originally thought would happen. I would argue that we actually engage in “seeing like a state” or thin simplifications in our day-to-day interactions. “We have repeatedly observed the natural and social failures of thin, formulaic simplifications imposed through the agency of state power” (Scott, 1999, p. 309).

The connection is the distinction Scott offers around metis as contextual knowledge:

Metis is typically translated into English as “cunning” or “cunning intelligence.” While not wrong, this translation fails to do justice to the range of knowledge and skills represented by metis. Broadly understood, metis represents a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment. (Scott, 1999, p.313)

This is different from the way Detienne and Vermant (1976) are taking it up. They look at the Greek mythology of Metis (Goddess of Prudence). She was of the Titan generation of Primordial deities and she was the first wife of Zeus, who was in the next generation of deities known as the Olympians. The prophecy was that Metis would bear extremely powerful children, first Athena and then a son so powerful that he would overthrow Zeus. Zeus tricked Metis into turning into a fly and he promptly swallowed her. Unfortunately for Zeus it was too late as Metis was pregnant with Athena. Metis remained alive in Zeus’s stomach and proceeded to craft Athena’s

armor—all of this activity would cause great discomfort to Zeus intestinal track. (From this ancient myth comes the well-used term ‘gut feeling’.) Eventually Hephaestus clove Zeus’s head off at the river Triton and Athena leapt fully-grown and armored from her father’s head. Zeus recovered not being any the worse for the experience. From this mythology, Metis is associated with the following attributes: wisdom, skill, craft, magical cunning, prudence and wise counsel (Martin, 2003, Apollodorus, 1997). Furthermore, the ordinary use of the word metis describes the combination of wisdom and cunning. What I am taking up is how Scott interprets and uses this term and in doing that creates a distinction between metis and phronesis, which I will argue later, are both key distinct components of leading and sensemaking in leading.

In Stacey’s work (2010), he refers to this process of simplification as first and second order abstractions. First order abstractions are our day-to-day narration of events that have occurred; second order abstractions are theories, models or sensemaking that we extrapolate from our stories. What do I mean by our stories? This narrative is an example of first order abstractions as I narrate about the work I am involved in. As I reflect and connect my thinking to a number of other writers, I will be elaborating second order abstractions. Elias also takes this idea up in *Involvement and Detachment* (1987) in that he talks about human agents always being involved in their day-to-day activities and at moments detaching or abstracting to make sense of what is going on. The difference here, and what I am highlighting, I think is important in that within involved detachment we are in context and working at connecting and making sense of what we are doing with others in the living present.

The third part of this is how Aristotle made distinctions around the acquisition and use of knowledge and how this has been taken up by recent scholars (Joas, 2000, Flyvbjerg, 2001, Antonacopoulou, 2010, MacIntyre, 2007). The following distinctions were offered: phronesis as practical knowledge, which goes beyond episteme as analytical and scientific knowledge, and techne as technical knowledge or know-how. It is this idea of practical knowledge that is also taken up by Dewey ([1925]1958), Elias (1978, 1991, [1939] 2000), Chia and Holt (2006), Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), Stacey (2001) and Burkitt (1999) that I am arguing is an underpinning to understanding practice and method in a different way and thus leading.

The connection is with practice (praxis)/practical. In the engagement of gaining this knowledge and the pursuant actions we take based on the intentions that arise out of our knowledge, there is a level of craftsmanship or excellence that is pursued in the acquisition of this knowledge. Furthermore there is an ongoing iteration of assessing and critiquing one's judgments as one defines and pursues a course of action (Antonacopoulou, 2010). This iteration of assessment/critique leads to a possible further iteration of reflection/reflexive thinking. It challenges the person to project their thinking back, thus changing both the practice they are engaged in and the capacity of being reflexive, in order to engage with the familiar in a new or novel way as if it was unfamiliar. This does not imply or conjure up some aspect of amnesia; on the contrary, as the human agent with the knowledge and experience encounters the familiar and approaches it in a novel way, he/she is eschewing a taken-for-granted approach. An example from this narrative would be the account of crossing a river, which is a very familiar task for me. I have crossed many rivers in many settings in various weather conditions and at different times of the year so I have all this 'crossing a river' contextual knowledge and practical knowledge. Nevertheless, I still meet every river as a novel experience. It is the capacity to think about one's thinking and to reflect on one's reflection (Schon, 1983) "... both ordinary people and professional practitioners often think about what they are doing, sometimes even while doing it. Stimulated by surprise, they turn thought back on action and on the knowing which is implicit in action." (p. 50). This reflective/reflexive capacity is a key component to connecting a person's knowledge to their sensemaking and making sense as they lead. I will discuss this and offer a distinction in the next section.

This brief narrative illustrates the above. It is early season (May/June) in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming. I am teaching a group of US Navy officers and Mid-Shipment on a 25-day Leadership Expedition. We have been traveling as an expedition for about 6 days. The snow pack is at 160% and travel has been challenging and robust. On this particular day the ambient temperature rose fairly dramatically, softening the snow and making travel even more challenging. The expedition is headed towards Pole Creek, which we will need to cross to make our re-ration in two days. I am reflecting to myself that there was a time at the school when



we routed courses North or South of Pole Creek this time of year and we did not cross it. We arrive at the river in two groups, meet up and decide on the plan for Edith to teach the river crossing class while Bob and I scout the possible crossings. I look at the river. Visually the volume seems high, which makes sense considering the large snow pack, the very warm day, and that it is mid-afternoon. Early season is just a bad time to cross a river. Bob and I are in agreement that we are not crossing the river. Edith ends her class and we check in with her and she concurs. To share our thinking and decision making with the students we set up a fish bowl situation: the three instructors discuss how and what they are thinking about the river crossing and the students listen in. We finish up and three of the students indicate that they see no reason why we should not cross the river especially since the re-ration is on the other side and, furthermore, that crossing is the objective. I review with them that if we miss the re-ration, they will leave it for us to find in a bear hang nearby and that if the night is cold enough we could see a drop of 9" to 18" making the crossing easier to manage tomorrow. Basically re-iterating what they had just heard all three of us discuss. They were not convinced. I start feeling anxious and challenged and wondering why they were not accepting my thinking. It then dawned on me that they had no knowledge of the river; they had not physically experienced it. They had only experienced it visually and orally through the class. I realized that my river knowledge resided in the many conversations that I had with each river I have crossed and that even the same river met anew invites me to a new conversation. So I turned to my three doubters and said "Gentlemen we need to have a robust conversation with the river." They looked at me in disbelief and said, "Well, we thought you said that we're not crossing." I explained to them that we are not crossing, but you have to experience the river to understand why we are making this choice.

In the bank of the river there was a small cove that allowed us to line up so we could use the "eddy method" (a single line where the front person creates an eddy). I took the front position and my three doubters lined up behind me. It looked pretty good: the short Italian old guy in front with three burly young guys behind looking a little skeptical. Once lined up in the cove we started sidestepping and moving toward the main channel of the river. The water is about 33/35 degrees causing feet and legs to turn numb fairly rapidly. As we step into the main current the water is just below

my waist, my sky pole, which I am using for stability as a tripod, is vibrating and my three students tell me that they get it. I answer them: “Gentlemen, I said a robust conversation with the river. One more step.” After lingering in the full force of the current we headed back to shore. The other two instructors took three students each and did the same thing. They now had a more engaged view of what river crossings entail and they are in the process of developing metis and phronesis and on their journey to becoming a bricoleur.

The sensemaking that I am ascribing to this narrative is that bricolage, metis and phronesis were all at play here for the instructors. In my case I took a page from ontological coaching (Sieler, 2003)—this type of coaching looks at connecting the domains of language, mind and body—realizing that their experience thus far had been in language and mind and they needed to physically experience the river (bricolage). I have worked and traveled in this particular mountain range for 30+ years. I have crossed this river 20 times in different conditions and I have crossed rivers in alpine terrain in North America, South America and Europe (metis). I was reflecting and critiquing my own thinking as I was being challenged and thinking about what action I wanted to take to help these students understand one of the most dangerous activities we engage in at NOLS (phronesis). There was also an aspect of this as I experienced my thinking/moving. As my own thinking was challenged and as I engaged in the gesture/response with students, I was also involved in an internal/silent conversation with myself that incorporated reflecting/reflexive thinking and I moved from just reinforcing the class and why we were not going to cross to having students actually experience the river. My thinking and actions moved in the temporal moment of the conversation. I will discuss this further later on in this chapter as I connect this to leadership models/theory and the functionalization of leading or how we might engage in the sensemaking of leading as a practical activity (Denis et al., 2010).

Similarly in the narrative about the power plant bricolage, metis and phronesis are all present as a way of sensemaking of what is occurring between Fran, Steve and me. In dealing with the conversation around safety and taking up the idea with Steve how it is not just safety and rules, but it is also risk and thinking about risk and connecting the age of plant personnel and athletic injuries, arises out of my work at

NOLS and how we deal with safety (bricolage) and the connection of aging population and repetitive physical work, and how it impacts safety, risk and injury rates (metis). The conversations about other ways of sensemaking around safety, risk and injury rates, leading to a discussion on stretching, massage therapy and so on (phronesis). This pattern also showed up in benchmarking Steve and his team own thinking around extending the timeline on maintenance outages (bricolage/ingenieur). The connections of longer run times between outages increasing revenue and compliance with new EPA rules on particulate emission and clarifying which benchmark group they are in (metis). Returning to the conversation with his boss and bosses boss to dispel the original thin formulaic generalization of declining performance (phronesis).

What I am choosing to illustrate here and creating distinctions around is taking up the idea of thinking, especially in reference to bricolage. Not merely to see it as a way of thinking for the output of an artifact in organizations, rather that this method of thinking is worthwhile just as a way of thinking. Secondly, Scott's use of metis as contextual knowledge is a useful distinction especially when contrasted with phronesis as practical knowledge. What I am pointing to here is that someone might have contextual knowledge and that what is also needed is the practical knowledge, which allows for the use and application of knowledge in context. What I am further arguing is that these are not thought of in this way or taken up in organizational writing in this context or connected in the application to leadership development. I will make these connections and further arguments in the next two sections.

### **Sensemaking and Making Sense as Distinct Processes**

In this section I am taking up the work of Weick (2001, 1993, 1995, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007, Weick et al., 2005) and O'Leary and Chia (2007) on sensemaking and my own use in this project, and the previous two projects, around sensemaking and making sense as I have used them interchangeably. During my academic progression meeting, one of the questions raised was around my use of sensemaking and making sense and if these were interchangeable for me. I thought about it and 'yes' they were. As I have continued to reflect on this idea of how we interpret what is going on, I realized that for me, at this point, they are not interchangeable. I agree with sensemaking as Weick takes it up and defines it as

something that is happening in retrospect with an idea of an outcome. He is basing this mainly on his understanding of how juries function, accident investigations or some other event that has caused a disruption. I think this offers a first order of sensemaking very similar to a first order abstraction and I would argue that there is what could be called a second order of sensemaking very similar to second order abstractions. This occurs especially when human agents are engaged in processes such as After Action Reviews (AAR), Root Cause Analysis (RCA) and debriefs. The outcomes of these processes are usually codified as Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), Best Practices, a theory or a new process. These processes and Weick's description of sensemaking in organizations are about creating contextual knowledge or metis.

The other aspect is making sense which is very similar to what Elias is talking about in *Involvement and Detachment* (1987). Arguing my point about the idea of involvement and detachment, I am going to use the word abstract because I think it more closely describes what we are actually engaged in. If we are attentive to our day-to-day interactions, we cannot help but be involved—we are in them. There are then moments, as we are involved, that we abstract to make sense of what is happening. The iteration of the involvement and abstraction are happening at the same time. We continue to be involved as we engage in sensemaking, and the sensemaking continues to change as we are involved and the iteration continues. All of this is happening in the living present as we are gesturing to others involved in our day-to-day interactions. Part of the challenge is to work with individuals in a group so that they are aware that this is actually occurring both consciously and unconsciously and, further, how they can be open to the novel ideas that might arise out of their making sense. The distinction here is that sensemaking is a retrospective glance to understand what happened, while making sense is occurring as we are in the process. When we are making sense we understand how we are sensemaking while being understanding and attentive to our own iterative process. As this is occurring it offers us the possibility of applying our practical wisdom in the iterative process. Much like Schon idea of “reflection in action” this would be practical wisdom in action or phronesis. Sensemaking and making sense are not either/or (or both/and) rather they are iterating at the same time. And I would argue they are both the same and different.

They are the same in that they are both about creating an understanding of events we are involved in and offering the opportunity for reflection and reflexive thought. By thought I mean the following: if we are paying attention to our thinking, our thinking might lead us to reflection, then to critique and reflexivity. It is this key aspect of our thinking and the application of reflexivity which is described as thinking about our thinking (Schon, 1983), injecting our thinking back into our practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), and encountering the familiar as if it is novel (Antonacopoulou, 2010). What I am pointing out is that generally in organizations we are practiced at engaging in the sensemaking and the output of “artifacts” by which I mean best practices, standard operating procedures, rules, process and so on. What we are not engaged in is paying attention to our own making sense and the making sense that might be occurring in the group.

### **Processes of Sensemaking and Leading**

In this section I want to focus on and explore a few examples of the formalized process of sensemaking used in both civilian and military organizations. The processes/theories I want to take up are After Action Reviews (AAR) (Group, 2010), Root Cause Analysis (RCA) (Johnson, 1973), and debriefs. The outcomes of these processes are usually codified as Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), best practices, a theory, rules or a new process, otherwise called “an artifact.” I have chosen these processes because they are the ones that I am most familiar with and that I work with most frequently. The way these processes are taken up is mainly about the production of a tangible output or artifact. In other words something is produced, there is a take away, actionable item, and/or things to do, or to be done, to prevent or change the possibility of similar outcome. By taking this up and pointing this out I am not advocating and/or suggesting that these processes of sensemaking should not be used and that the outputs of such processes might not be useful in some way. What I am pointing out is that these processes are being taken up in a fairly monochromic way in how they are used, functionalized and engaged with in our day-to-day interactions. What I am pointing out is *what* is not happening, which is the attentiveness to making sense.

Embedded in the processes of sensemaking are the interactions and patterns of the human agent involved in the processes. The interaction itself is part of the

understanding of what happened. In other words the understanding is not just in the narrative of the event, as well as the facts and data that are collected. It is also in how the participants are making sense of their current experience in the process they are involved in and in what is occurring between the participants; such as inclusion/exclusion, insider/outsider, and power relations, how hidden transcripts are made public, how conflict and group anxiety are engaged with and made sense of and so on.

An example of this would be the two NASA disasters of the Challenger and Columbia space shuttles. When the RCA and debriefings were completed, the output of the cause of the Challenger catastrophe was the failure of the “o” rings and how the engineers at NASA and Morton Thiokol made sense of the progressive deterioration of the “o” rings as an “in-family” event (meaning it was routine in nature). Today when people are queried about the Challenger disaster the causative issue that is most often cited is the “o” rings; however, the failure of the “o” rings was basically an artifact failing. The artifact was allowed to fail due in part to how the engineers at NASA and Morton Thiokol did (and did not) interact and the external political pressure for launching. The subsequent investigation and analysis not only identified the “o” ring failure, but it also identified a number of the issues that had emerged between the two engineering groups (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). I would argue that one of the issues/problems was that the two groups of engineers did not interact to make sense of how they were functioning as a group; it was an outside investigative group that told them. The behavior became reified and similar patterns showed up years later in how the information for the shuttle Columbia was subsequently handled, which sadly led to a second shuttle accident. The expression that showed up in both accidents was “in-family” and that meant that what they were dealing with or making sense of was routine in nature.

The connection I am making and what I am highlighting is *what* is paid attention to and *what* is being engaged. It is much easier to engage in a process where one can list a series of action items or rules and it might seem more difficult to engage in a conversation with team members to make sense of how they are interacting and dealing with the information that is arising; i.e., how are they dealing and processing group anxiety, relationships of power, inclusion /exclusion, insider/outsider, gossip,

conflict/agreement and the ongoing enabling and constraining that are present in groups at different times and at the same time? This requires for the group members to think, to reflect and then to be reflexive and answer questions. How do we codify this? How do we turn this into action items, standard operating procedures or rules? Well, any of this can be codified or made into standard operating procedure and rules. The issue, I would argue, is that when we do this we then reify the interaction and, at some level, remove the thinking, reflecting, and/or reflexive processes that are key to leading and creating change. This was illustrated in my narrative in regard to how the morning meetings at the power plant are started with a reading of a safety rule or standard operating procedure. What became apparent in the meeting was that it had turned into a rote exercise. The reader and the listeners were disconnected from what they were reading and hearing. Because there is a definite need for rules and standard operating procedures, and for people to follow them, this issue led to a later discussion with Steve about compliance and commitment. What is also clear is that mere compliance is not sufficient, you also need commitment—people need to want to follow the rules—and I would argue that a way for this observant dedication to occur is if people are thinking, reflecting and reflexive. Moreover, I would argue, this sequence is actually about creating and changing one's day-to-day practice.

The need in these processes is for attention to both the sensemaking and the making sense. The awareness, questioning and explorations of the patterns that emerge within the group involved in the task of sensemaking are a key informational component that needs to be included in the final narrative. The exploration of these emergent patterns has the potential to create change by influencing the emergent practice associated with reported best practices, standard operating procedures or rules.

### **Reflection and Reflexivity**

In the previous section on sensemaking and making sense I briefly took up reflection and reflexivity. What I want to highlight is the connection this has with what I have been arguing. Reflection and reflexivity are key activities allowing us to connect the above threads of the discussion.

In Schon's work *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) in which he critiques Technical Rationality and looks at it from an educational point of view: "From the

point of view of the model of Technical Rationality institutionalized in the professional curriculum, real knowledge lies in the theories and techniques of basic and applied science” (Schon, 1983, p. 27).

What he is illustrating here is the dominant way of thinking in education and the struggle he was having in relationship to practice in management where the consultant/practitioner was expected to choose the best applicable model, theory, best practice or rule. What he suggested was the idea of “reflection in action,” which he described as being composed of four parts: routinized action, encounter of surprise, reflection and new action (1987, 1983). Schon, I believe, was engaged in both sensemaking and making sense of the practice he was engaged in and through his narrative offered a more novel way of sensemaking. Schon’s work is merely a starting point to prompt thinking about reflection in action. I would argue he limited his approach by creating a linear model and that “surprise is encountered.” Surprise could also be interpreted as a “breakdown” in that something malfunctions, there is a disturbance, and/or an interruption (Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009, Chia and Holt, 2006, Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986, Dreyfus, 1991, Heidegger, 1962, Segal, 2010). These might all be types of surprises and in a way we are reifying what we are experiencing.

Surprise is always present if we make sense of our experiences from a complex responsive process of relating and at times we deal with surprise with improvisation and spontaneity. Risk, spontaneity and improvisation are always available to us in organizational change, leading, and decision making. The choice we make consciously or unconsciously is around our own enabling and constraining. When we are confronted with surprise we choose both consciously or unconsciously to engage with it by assessing the risk and, depending on how we make sense of the verbal gestures of our clients or the groups we are in and the inherent risk, we can choose a script, a model or best practice and respond according to a plan. Our second choice might be spontaneity and improvisation while a third choice might be a combination of starting with a script and assessing the risk of critique, which has the possibility of a spontaneous and improvised inquiry. The above appears to be very linear in that we are making well-calculated choices. The conscious/unconscious choice or assessment is all taking place at the same time. The novelty arises in the



moment as we respond to the verbal gesture being made by the other human agents who are responding to our verbal gesture.

An example earlier in this narrative was how I chose to respond and make sense of the safety issues as I reflected on Steve's narrative around the injuries at the plant. I asked about athletic injuries. What was I doing or reflecting on? I was connecting the various narratives of how long people had been at the plant (i.e., 20-25 years), then roughly calculating their age, and subsequently relating that to how athletic injuries occur on course at NOLS (i.e., overuse of a limb). I took the risk that bringing athletic injuries up might lead to a worthwhile discussion around safety, injury and risk management; it led to an unscripted and spontaneous conversation on this topic. What I am pointing to here is the value of reflection and that "encounter of surprise" is always iterating itself. In a way surprise is always present. I am stating this based on my interpretation of Mead's (1934) work on the emergence of self-consciousness in the iteration of communication in the process of gesture/response. There is both an ongoing public conversation between us and other human agents and at the same time there is an ongoing silent/internal conversation of gesture and responses. Mead referred to the silent part of the conversation as the "I-me dialectic." It is within this ongoing iteration that the 'I' and 'me' are not separate; they are merely different phases of the self. It is this dialectic that offers us the possibility of spontaneity in how the 'I' responds to the 'me.' In other words, it is this iteration of both the public and private gestures that are happening at the same time that allows our thinking to move and engage with the familiar in novel and spontaneous ways. This is why surprise is always present.

Reflecting and reflexivity can be conflated at times. Take Schon's (1983, 1987) work in which he talks about reflecting and thinking about your thinking, which he interprets as reflecting. I would argue that he is talking about reflecting and reflexivity. The point he is making is that as the practitioner and/or the client are "reflecting in action" they are impacting the practice they are engaged in. Other interpretations of reflexivity are: injecting our thinking back into our practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, Holland, 1999); encountering the familiar as if it is novel (Antonacopoulou, 2010); and radical reflexivity as an unsettling or uncertainty about basic assumptions used to describe reality (Cunliffe, 2003, 2004, 2009).

Reflexivity is about how we engage in sensemaking and how we interpret what our experiences are as we are engaged with other human agents. It is this aspect of reflexivity and sensemaking that allows our thoughts to move and engage in action—and that is why this is a critical aspect of leadership development and coaching. It is not only reflecting that is critical, it is the combination of reflection and reflexivity that offers the opportunity of novel improvisation.

In closing the following offers a view of what this might mean to leadership in practice or leading as practical activity:

“... [T]he practice of effective leadership is that of participating skillfully in interactions with others in reflective and imaginative ways, aware of the potentially destructive processes one may be caught up in. It is in this practice of immersing while abstracting from the games of organizations that one is recognized as leader, as one who has the capacity to assist the group to continue acting ethically, creatively and courageously into the unknown.” (Stacey, 2010, p. 217)

### **Hegemony**

At this point it would be simple to take up power and a discussion of power in the context of why the dominant writing and discourse on leadership development and organizational understandings do not take up these ideas. What I want to do is look at this in a more nuanced way and take up the ideas of Gramsci (2011, 2000, 1957/2007) on cultural hegemony. Gramsci used this to explain the reinforcing aspect of the capitalist system in society, approaching this from both a philosophical and sociological standpoint. His thinking was that a culturally diverse society can be ruled or dominated by one of its social classes; it is the dominance of one social group over the other. For example, in a capitalist/market society it might be the ruling industrial class while in Soviet Russia or Communist China the ruling class is composed of the party/government officials. What Gramsci claims in the context of the early 20th century is that the ideas of the ruling class are seen as the norm and are experienced as universal ideologies. The perception is that they are benefitting everybody when in reality they are only benefitting the ruling class. It is ironic that Gramsci’s work focused specifically on explaining a capitalist/market society when in actuality his philosophical/sociological concept of cultural hegemony can be applied to any group

that has a ruling class including, but not limited to, societal structures that are communist, socialist, democratic, fascist, and so on.

Scott (1990) critiques Gramsci's work and ideas in regards to cultural hegemony. He takes up Gramsci's work in the literal context of when it was written. What is interesting is that in Scott's critique and in his explanation of the aspect of the public transcript (dominant discourse), he writes the following:

The power of the dominant thus ordinarily elicits—in the public transcript—a continuous stream of performance of deference, respect, reverence, admiration, esteem, and even adoration that serve to further convince ruling elites that their claims are in fact validated by the social evidence they see before their eyes. (Scott, 1990, p. 93)

What Scott is describing are the reinforcing, co-created behaviors that emerge in organizations and societies that reinforce the veracity of public transcripts and the cultural hegemony it has the potential to create.

The ideas of the ruling class are seen as the norm and are experienced as universal ideologies and connect this with how current writers are taking up leading, leadership development in organization and the attached sensemaking that occurs. The current mainstream writing on these topics is taken as the norm and experienced as universal ideologies that are taken for granted by others. Examples of these topics include terms such as systems thinking, mindful organization, collective mindfulness, organizational sensemaking, safety, and so on. What I am pointing to in taking up cultural hegemony is that there is a 'ruling class' of writers and writing regarding organizational understanding and leadership and, continuing, that the thinking engaged in is based on how our brain functions, the aspects of the right and left lobes of the brain, and how the left lobe has become a dominant driver in the output of thinking and sensemaking (McGilchrist, 2009). This is illustrated, also, by what I have been writing about in my previous projects in regard to causality and how it underpins our thinking in regard to sensemaking of organizational life.

The work of Schon (1983, 1987) struggles with aspects of the dominant discourse by his willingness to take up and critique "Technical Rationality" while, at the same time, his critique and thinking drift back to what he is critiquing. In the end his view of the practitioner reflecting is constrained by his own views and his offering

is structured as a technical rational approach to reflecting. Schon's work is very much in keeping with a Kantian self-actualizing worldview, which is in keeping with the dominant approach to human interaction and an understanding of leading. Experience is observed as if we are outside of the experience, thinking precedes action and that method is separate from experience. What I am arguing for is a Hegelian approach to, and making sense of, human interaction and leading in which the reality we are struggling with is an ongoing and evolving process. We are struggling with the paradox of theory and practice as we engage in sensemaking and making sense. As we engage in sensemaking and making sense of our experiences, the experience itself is intensified—paying attention to the particular—and the very act of thinking is action and it incorporates a unity of method and ethics.

### **Conclusion**

In the experience of writing this project and developing my thinking the project itself exemplifies what I am arguing for and what might be useful to other practitioners who are looking at leading within organizations, leadership development, training and coaching.

I started with looking at how we assemble information (bricolage), the nature of thin simplifications and contextual knowledge (metis) and the ways we apply learning practical knowledge (phronesis). The connection is about our own thinking and how we engage in sensemaking (retrospective) and making sense (in the moment). The further connection and distinction I have made is around the production of an artifact (output of concrete product, best practice, standard operating procedure and so on) and that in the case of bricolage it can be taken up as a method and practice of thinking and that when the thinking is sufficient, it does not require a physical output.

Based on my experience and having looked at both Weick's work on sensemaking and Elias's work on involved detachment, there is a useful connection and distinction to be made especially in the context of sensemaking processes such as After Action Reviews, Root Cause Analysis and Debriefings. In paying attention to sensemaking we are attending to the particular/the micro interactions that are arising in the process such as inclusion/exclusion, insider/outsider, and power relations; how hidden transcripts are made public; how conflict and group anxiety are engaged and

made sense of and so on. In addition there is relevance also for leading, leadership development and decision making. How can the practitioner work with clients and engage them so that they are able to start paying attention to the particular that is occurring in their interactions and the ongoing “I-me dialectic” that is informing them and creating movement in their thought at the same time. There is a critical aspect to paying attention to both the retrospective of what happened and how the human agents involved in the process are interacting. I used the example of the Challenger and Columbia disasters that looked at the cause of the accidents and at the same time did not engage the participants in making sense of how they were interacting. And so the thinking and sensemaking that allowed the Challenger to explode were the same patterns that showed up in the Columbia crash. The thinking that referred to the deteriorating “o” rings or a big chunk of protective covering missing as “in-family” raises the questions: How are they making sense of what is going on and how are they able to categorize this as routine or repetitive? What is important here is not necessarily a solution, but rather being able to see that the patterns un-dealt with by the human agent engaged in them will continue to iterate them. A means to change the pattern is by the engagement of the human agents in both sensemaking and making sense and, as they are engaged in this process, to be aware of their own reflections and reflexivity.

The question that arises as I conclude this is: So what? Why is this so complicated? Why so many bits and pieces? I would argue that all of this is iterating itself at the same time and we approach it in a taken-for-granted way. We do not think about what we are doing. An analogy is riding a bicycle: we pedal, steer, balance, pay attention to our surroundings and so on. We are bicycling. When one or many of these actions stop functioning and we fall off the bicycle, then we notice. All I am doing is bringing attention to all of a number of things we might be doing as we lead, engage in leadership training and development, and make decisions. These are aspects that are not being taken up in this way by current leadership and organizational writers.

I have engaged in what I have been critiquing: the creation of artifact. By looking at aspects of leading I have created a series of artifact/best practices/rules, if you will, and in this way the reader could then take them up. Another way to take this up is that while all of this is happening at the same time in our ongoing day-to-day

interactions, what happens when we notice any of this or when we pay attention to the practice we are engaged in? What I am arguing for is a Hegelian approach to, and making sense of, human interaction and leading in which the reality we are struggling with is an ongoing and evolving process. We are struggling with the paradox of theory and practice as we engage in sensemaking and making sense. As we engage in sensemaking and making sense of our experiences, the experience itself is intensified—paying attention to the particular—and that the very act of thinking is action and it incorporates a unity of method and ethics. The patterns of our local interactions, as they iterate and go through small changes become organization-wide patterns. (The beginnings of the issue with the “o” rings might have been “in-family” and then, as that pattern iterated itself and small changes occurred, it became an “out-of-family” event. And yet it was not made sense of that way.) It is the paying attention to the particular of the interactions, the inclusion/exclusion, insider/outsider, and power relations, how hidden transcripts are made public, how conflict and group anxiety are engaged with and made sense of and so on that offers the opportunity to change how we are making sense of what is going on—what is emerging between the human agents involved.

In closing it is *how* we think and assemble contextual knowledge and use practical knowledge, our interpretation of what has happened and what is happening, the ongoing emerging qualities of sensemaking and making sense while at the same time reflecting and being reflexive and experiencing the iteration of the movement of our own thinking and, finally, how we are constrained and enabled by the hegemony of our practice and thinking that offers us the possibility of making sense of leading as a practical activity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Synopsis

#### Project 5, February 2012

#### Leadership Development and Coaching as Reflexive Practice

#### Introduction

This section is both a synopsis and further development of my thinking. It is both a critique of my previous four research projects and a projection of my thinking as it continues to move. The themes running through the four projects are identified and connected to method, theory and practice as they iterate at the same time through the research. The word iterate is used to describe the repetitive processes in which human beings participate where the end of one cycle is the beginning of the next and small changes are embedded in each cycle and continue to amplify as the process continues. I briefly present the themes and arguments emerging out of my four research projects and how these (themes and arguments) are connected to the development of my thinking and practice. This introduces what is driving my main arguments and conclusions. I then connect this to the contribution my research is making to this field of knowledge and professional practice. Reflexivity is an ongoing theme of both personal engagement in my research, practice and thinking as practitioner, and it is a key component of what I am arguing as a critical element of leadership development and coaching. A narrative methodology is used in my research work.

In the Introduction I referenced and described the different settings that I work in and deal with in the domain of leading. Although the settings change, the topics and the micro aspects that I am researching and making sense of in relationship to the domain of leadership development and coaching illustrate the continuity.

These aspects of narrative range from participating in all-plant meetings of a large power plant in which participants voice the loss of recognition they are experiencing to hiking through Big Sur in an early February coastal storm at 2800 ft. with Interagency Wilderness Firefighters. In the power plant narrative, sitting through the early morning operational meetings for a power plant, I experienced the safety reading of the day as a surreal event. It had become thin, formulaic and reified; it was

not connected to anybody's experience any longer. Safety and risk had become concrete objects to be directed and managed and everybody in the meeting was attending to something else. They were not paying attention to what was being shared. In the hiking narrative there was the struggle with communication, decision making in the dropping temperature, rain, and the onset of hypothermia as well as the struggle of the leadership team to convince the group to hike through a large field of snags (large, dead trees—due to fire, disease, age—that are still standing), when they have been trained to stay away from this type of environment because of the risk of injury due to falling snags.

In looking at the literature on consulting, coaching, leading and leadership development what has struck me is that the dominant narrative is underpinned by the natural sciences of certainty. Based on assumptions of causalities that are efficient (if-then), rational (free will, observer can choose) or formative (already enfolded within the organism), and wrapped in “systems thinking,” a leader, decision maker, or manager can stand outside of, or apart from, the group they are part of (as if this is possible) and impact the “system” or change it as if they are not being changed or impacted at the same time by the ongoing micro interactions.

The emphasis in leadership development and coaching is that there needs to be a change and that the change can be quantified in a measurable way. This leads to the use of various models to improve communication, decision making, self-awareness, conflict exploration, diversity, and so on. The focus then is to become proficient at the theory/model rather than paying attention to the practice/experiences in the interactions, the particular, and the ongoing iteration of the micro-interactions. To highlight this, a brief summary of complex responsive processes of relating, which underpins the viewpoint of this thesis, will lay out how seemingly disconnected topics are connected and woven through the thesis.

This theme of splitting theory (models, best practices, decision making, and so on) from practice (the human experience in the living present) is a key subject that is engaged within the exploration of time, involvement and detachment, theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action, and the understanding of sensemaking and making sense. This distinction and examination of splitting theory and practice is written about by Chia and Holt (2006) in the context of *how* strategy is developed in



various organizations. They similarly argue, as I do, that theory and practice are happening at the same time and that this is an iterative process.

The themes that are explored emerge out of the narrative of the practice I was engaged in with clients, students, and colleagues. The day-to-day work/practice that these varied narratives describe are about leadership development and leadership coaching as part of that development. From the narrative (and the reflection on the narrative), themes emerged that are connected to what I was doing and how I think of what I will do in the future. I will briefly recap the narrative as necessary to make these connections in the synopsis.

In Project One I revisited a number of key writers who had influenced my work up to that point. Reviewing these writers and contextualizing them to what I was currently thinking about and reading, led to a beginning critique and reflection on how I was making sense of my work in a different way. In looking at emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998, Goleman et al., 2002, Crosby, 1998), leading and leadership development (Heifetz, 1994, Heifetz et al., 2009b, Heifetz et al., 2009a, Heifetz and Linsky, 2002), and at the work process area (i.e., the waterline model based on the work of Harrison, Taylor & Short (Harrison, 1970) and the group effectiveness model (Schwarz, 2002)), what became salient was the taken-for-granted approach that was a key component of the practice I was engaged in.

In my review of Projects Two, Three and Four I will examine further the connection and understanding of time starting with William James (1948), connecting his view to the description of the “living present” Stacey (2003), and how this influences how we might think about our own experience. In addition, in Project Two I looked at reification (Lukacs, 1923 / 1972, Honneth, 2008b, Elias, 1978), the ongoing struggle for recognition that is embedded in our day-to-day interactions (Honneth, 1995) and *The Uncanny* (Freud, 1919 / 2003), and how they might be related in our *sensemaking/making sense* of our experience. The distinction here is that sensemaking is a retrospective glance to understand what happened, while making sense is occurring as we are in the process. When we are making sense we understand how we are sensemaking while being understanding and attentive to our own iterative process. I also looked at aspects of my consulting/coaching practice through contrasting and critiquing the waterline model and then contrasting that with

complex responsive processes. In addition, I reflected on comparative dimensions of a consulting practice (Bader, 1995) and what this may entail for my own practice.

In Project Three the additional themes were ideas around involvement and detachment Elias (1987) and the current literature on management and leadership—contrasting this with Elias’ thinking on involvement and detachment, and complex responsive processes. This leads to a further exploration of the living present, ideology and power, and method and practice. These final themes from Project Three were picked up in Project Four and explored further.

Themes that were explored in Project Four were the ideas of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1968, Weick, 2001, 1993), metis (Scott, 1999), phronesis (Flyvbjerg, 2001), cultural hegemony (Jones, 2006, Scott, 1990, Gramsci, 2011) and power (Gramsci, 2011, Faubion, 2000, Gramsci, 2000), sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007) and making sense (Elias, 1978, 1987, 1991, [1939] 2000, Mead, 1934).

The synopsis will look at, discuss and reflect on facilitated group discussion, teaching, and coaching (not as an end in itself, but rather as an understanding of the ongoing interactions that are taking place in the different relationships that are emerging). And further, it will look at the role of the practitioner (consultant/coach/teacher) to participate intentionally—paying attention to the ongoing micro interactions and not driving toward a predetermined goal or outcome, and yet realizing that just by the nature of being human (and the history and context we bring), we are at the same time moving towards a goal or outcome. They are happening at the same time.

The synopsis goes on to describe a narrative methodology: why it is a valid method for what is being researched especially in relationship to social science research and how does it stand up to criticism in regards to objectivity, rigor and reliability.

The synopsis will then look at what is generalizable and adds to this field of knowledge and professional practice.

## **Discussion**

### **Complex responsive processes**

This sets the context both for the narrative nature of my thesis and how I make sense of the movement of my thinking and practice. Complex responsive process looks at and takes up three ways of thinking about the activity of human beings (Stacey, 2007). First, looking at the work of Mead (1934) around communicative interactions, which is experienced as a series of gestures and responses. Those gestures and responses are seen as a single social action from which meaning emerges. The second part incorporates Elias' (1978, 1987, 1991) ideas from a sociological standpoint and that all human interaction involves the change and movement of individual and group identity at the same time. The ongoing emergence and changing power relation, the iteration of inclusion and exclusion, and all of this arises out of choices human beings are making based on ideology. (Mead also had similar ideas around the emergence of the self, the social and ideology). The third part is taken up by analogy from the complexity sciences (Prigogine, 1997) and the ongoing interactions that take place in organizations that exhibit self-organizing properties leading to macro or population-wide patterns to emerge, which are both unstable and stable at the same time.

Let me further explain: self-organizing is constantly iterating as human beings come together. Whether in a dyad, small group, team or organization, these human beings can only interact with a small portion of the total population; these interactions are based on their own organizing principles, local rules or norms. The micro and macro patterns that emerge are both stable and unstable mainly because any one participant does not control them. So as I explored and compared complex responsive process with other explanations from the literature, this has led me in my thesis to think very differently about the role of a practitioner in the process of leadership development as a way to affect organizational change.

### **Understanding theory, practice, reification, and role as theory and practice**

In Projects One and Two, a number of theories and writers that influenced and directed my early work (Block, 2000, Schein, 1987, 1999, Scherer and Short, 2001, Schwarz, 2002) and specifically in Project Two I took up the work of Bader (1995) as

she looks at the consultant's role and a number of coaching book authors who are also looking at the role of a consultant/coach (O'Neill, 2000, Peltier, 2010, Sieler, 2003, Stober and Grant, 2006, Whitworth et al., 1998, Flaherty, 1999). In all of these domains there is a belief that the consultant/coach/teacher and leader needs to be objective and independent. Emerging in the four projects is that this idea of detached objective independence is fictional, and that the practitioners are humans with the associated emotions and life history that influences how they engage in *sensemaking/making sense*. What arises is a question around the split between theory and practice. The position the above writers take is that one needs to focus on theory.

This exploration arose in Project Two because both the client and the practitioner were having similar experiences and struggles with the work that was occurring. The error elimination program being launched by its very nature was reification of what needed to happen to eliminate errors and there was an ongoing struggle for recognition that was playing itself out for both managers and employees. Finally, there is the uncanny exchange that occurs between the General Manager and Union President around rescinding union support for the error elimination initiative, which the union had originally recommended, because of an issue of overtime in connection to safety. Every team had stated 'safety over production' as one of their values. The hidden caveat being: As long as it does not impact my wallet.

What becomes salient is that theory and practice are happening at the same time; they are iterating and influencing each other at the same time. It is this stance of splitting theory and practice that leads to the experience of reification in groups and organizations. What is being emphasized here is what both Lukacs (1923 / 1972) and Elias (1978) explored as they engaged in sensemaking in regard to the day-to-day activities. The splitting was in the setting up of the Error Elimination Program and through the interactions the realization that the success of the program was embedded in the emerging relationships of the participants and not merely the application of thin formulaic generalizations, standard operating procedures, and best practices.

Lukacs saw reification as arising out of a capitalist commodity exchange and through the day-to-day interactions of calculations and decision making; it leads to a process of rationalization that eventually changes all phenomena to objects of economic exchange. He saw this happening to all domains: whether humans and their

intersubjective relationships or natural processes and the products they bring forth. In the end, all of these phenomena lose their vibrancy and aliveness. Lukacs (1923 / 1972) put it succinctly as “a relation between people has taken on the character of a thing” (p. 83).

In his work, Elias is concerned about *how* reification is experienced in the intersubjective relationship or its social aspect—the loss of the dimension of the social or, perhaps a better way to say it is the tension between the individual and the social. Reification is then the habit of forgetting the genesis in social interaction of what seems, in the moment, to be an object in itself and that is sustained only in social interaction. So Elias is specifically seeing this as arising in the social and then residing there. What is being illustrated is the fallacy in splitting the interaction (practice) from where it is generated, which we do to engage in sensemaking—we abstract and create an abstraction to better understand what we are engaged in. The fallacy arises when we then do not pay attention to what our abstraction arose out of and act as if this abstraction is something concrete (a real thing) that we can manage, move, and impact; and we then lose the connection to what continues to emerge in the interactions we are engaged in.

When we choose to split theory and practice and just focus on theory, we lose the vibrancy of the interaction in which the possibility of novelty and change reside. In just focusing on theory we reify this aspect and then act in the belief that the practitioner can manage and/or manipulate the process towards a desired outcome. What this ignores is that theory and practice are interconnected and continue to iterate and emerge as the practitioner’s interactions play out during the engagement.

This view in Project Two leads to a further exploration of what a human agent might be experiencing in organizations as he/she is engaged in leadership development and their ongoing day-to-day interaction. What made this salient in this project was the afternoon meeting that was organized by the General Manager of the plant to address the challenge that had been raised that NRG (and by implication the management team) was not committed to the Error Elimination Initiative. What went on to happen during the facilitation that I was leading to address management’s commitment to this initiative was the management team absenting themselves to be on a conference call. It was this very demonstrable act that gave the answer to the

challenge in relation to being committed to the Error Elimination Program. It was the narrative of management's actions and responses when queried, and the subsequent reflection on my part, which led to the exploration of struggle for recognition, reification, and the uncanny.

The two connected themes are in the work of Honneth (1995) around the struggle for recognition and Freud (1919 / 2003) on *The Uncanny*. Being argued, connected and reflected upon is this aspect of dividing, which might lead to an experience of being reified. As human beings experience reification in organizations what they encounter is a struggle for mutual recognition (both client/s and practitioner) as theory and practice are split, and practice (the human experience) in the living present is not attended to. In addition the experience of the uncanny—the familiar and unfamiliar at the same time—is a by-product of this splitting.

The illustration here is how three unrelated ideas in literature are deeply connected to the human experience in organizations, directly impact the work of both the practitioner and the client/s, and offer another way of engaging in sensemaking and making sense for both the practitioner and the client/s.

### **Leading and leadership development and causality**

The work in Project Three found me with a group of Interagency Wilderness Firefighters. I spent 10 days with them delivering a leadership development module called L 380. The material and models were in keeping with the current literature and approach to leadership development. What became salient, both as I worked with this group and as I later narrated that experience, was that they expected a rationalist approach and the rational application of thin, formulaic cybernetic interpretations of decision making; for instance, to work and lead to the outcome that they thought they wanted. What they actually experienced as they paid attention to the micro interaction was a thick, deeply contextual interplay of enabling and constraining that was occurring between multiple human beings at the same time. Based on their experience and how they were taking up decision making their interpretation from a rationalist stand point was that, in some way, they had done something wrong. In the ensuing conversation of sensemaking it offered them another view of what occurred. The significant connection here was that when we operate from a rationalist causality we are focused on a right way of executing decision making. When practitioner and

participants are operating from a transformational causality it offers the thickness of context and attentiveness to one's experience and the opportunity to skillfully participate and adjust as others respond.

In Project Three/Chapter Three a brief review of some of the main themes in leadership literature was used as a starting point for sensemaking as to how leadership development is delivered and taught. James MacGregor Burns' *Leadership* (1978) takes a political view of what leadership is and creates the distinction of transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Abraham Zaleznik's article "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" (1977) created the break and/or distinction between managing and leading. John Kotter's *What Leaders Really Do* (1990) built on this distinction and both are based on a system outlook of running an organization. Simply put, the organization is seen as a system which is a second order abstraction (Stacey, 2010). It is then interpreted and acted out as if it was real. Based on this, managers and leaders are both inside the system and outside the system orchestrating and moving it. And when they are outside, they are able to have an unbiased view of what is happening. As argued above, we are always involved so this ability to be outside or inside something is merely a spatial analogy that is imagined. These are some of the major writers of the past 40 years who are referred to as sources for sensemaking of leading and they are operating from the same underlying efficient and rationalist causality in how they think about human organizations and abstract models.

In Chapter Three I described two major areas of causality (the causality of certainty and the causality of uncertainty), took up Ralph Stacey's work (2010), and contextualized on how we would make sense of what we thought was happening between human being in the domains of leading, decision making and communication.

The above illustrates the necessity for understanding what thinking and premises are involved in laying out leadership in the dominant literature and how this might contrast with other ways of sensemaking around leadership writing. This is critical in my understanding to be able to contrast and critique what is being organized and what is being delivered as leadership development and coaching. The work I did with the Wilderness Inter-Agency Firefighters led to my next area of inquiry: involvement and detachment in leading.

## **Involvement and detachment in leading**

This slowly emerged as a salient theme in Projects Two through Four. The inception was in Project Two as I worked at understanding Elias' work and connecting it to my own experiences. As it iterated (note that I am reifying my own experience in my attempt to convey this to another human agent) and as I went back and revisited Elias (1987) and Poe's "Descent in to the Maelstrom" (Poe, 1975), the phenomenon of involvement and detachment emerged in the context of the practice I was engaged in with my writing, interactions with faculty and colleagues in the learning group and at residential conferences, with working with clients, and by paying attention to the experience of involved detachment. It emerged in the narrative about the Interagency Wilderness Fire Fighters in Project Three standing on the side of a mountain at 2800 ft. in the pouring rain, as they struggled with decision making and we, as the instructors, stood there allowing them to struggle. Thick in their experience in the cold and wet, multiple voices inputting information (with designated leaders skillfully and not so skillfully participating) and trying to make sense to move toward a decision that the group was in agreement with. Coming to a decision, reaching the col, experiencing the agreement breaking down, working at making sense of what had changed and why, the connection here was a combining of the phenomena of involvement and detachment and the emergence of self and group, and connecting this to our understanding of time and the emergence of knowledge in action.

In relating Elias' work *Involvement and Detachment* (1987) to leadership development and coaching, the connection is being made in the following two ways: first, it is a way of understanding one's practice of leading and second, how this distinction of being involved and detached at the same time impacts leadership development and coaching. In making my point about the idea of involvement and detachment, I am going to use the word abstract because it more closely describes what we are actually engaged in. If we are attentive to our day-to-day interactions, we cannot help but be involved—we are in them. There are then moments, as we are involved, that we abstract to make sense of what is happening. The practice of the involvement and abstraction (detachment) are happening at the same time. We continue to be involved as we make sense and our sensemaking continues to change



as we are involved and the iteration continues. All of this is happening in the living present as we are gesturing to others involved in our day-to-day interactions. Part of the challenge is to work with individuals in a group so that they are aware that this is actually occurring both consciously and unconsciously, and, further, how they can be open to the novel ideas that might arise out of their sensemaking.

How this distinction impacts leadership development and coaching is twofold: a) in the awareness and attentiveness to our own practice of involved detachment the very practice of the practitioner changes at the same time as they are engaged with the client/s—there is an iterative dynamic quality to the relationship that emerges and allows the possibility of novelty to occur; b) it offers the client/s another way of thinking about how they engage in sensemaking (retrospective) and making sense (in the here and now) —it also offers them the possibility of paying attention to their practice at a micro level, thus allowing the possibility of greater attention to the patterns that are emerging as they engage in leading through the verbal gestures that are defined as decision making.

### **Theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action**

In Project Four/Chapter Four one of my goals was to understand and have a clear distinction between theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action and how this might apply to my understanding of leadership coaching and leadership development. It arose out of a series of interactions around power plant performance and risk management. The issue I had been hired to work with the General Manager on was declining performance at this particular power plant. The declining performance was tied to the increased number of reported accidents. The accidents had doubled from 3 to 6 year to year. What arose in the conversation with the General Manager and his team was that this was a very thin formulaic interpretation of what was actually happening. Four of the reported injuries were athletic injuries due to repetitive chronic overuse and an aging work force. At that time I was not making a distinction between theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action. The distinction arose as I was engaged in both the sensemaking of my own work, as I narrated the events in Project Four, and how I was making sense of my own work with my clients. The breakdown occurred around the issue of safety and risk management. It was the discussion around the need for safety rules (theoretical knowledge) and risk management/application of

rules in the day-to-day interaction (knowledge in action). The connection in looking at the writers below was that theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action are emergent, iterative, and complimentary and that for human beings the connections of these two types of knowledge occurs when they engage in reflection and reflexivity.

In Levi-Strauss' (1968) work the distinction he created was between the mind of a bricoleur and an ingenieur as a way of understanding how human beings relate to their context. The bricoleur has a deep connection to the concrete or the particular of their environment. This is illustrated by diligent observation, a thorough inventory of all elements in their surrounding environment, and an ability through a keen sense of understanding based on their particular environment. I connected this with the work of Scott (1999) around the Greek term metis, which he defines as contextual knowledge. In addition I took up Flyvbjerg (2001) use and description of phronesis that is supported by the work of recent scholars (Joas, 2000, Antonacopoulou, 2010, MacIntyre, 2007). The following distinctions were offered: phronesis as practical knowledge, which goes beyond episteme as analytical and scientific knowledge, and techne as technical knowledge or know-how. It is this idea of practical knowledge that is also taken up by Dewey ([1925]1958), Elias (1978, 1991, [1939] 2000), Chia and Holt (2006), Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), Stacey (2001) and Burkitt (1999) that I am arguing is an underpinning to understanding practice and method in a different way and is connected to another way of sensemaking of leading, leadership development and leadership coaching.

In examining these different authors what is illustrated is their own struggle with defining knowledge and how we understand knowledge so that it leads us to the possibility of a novel outcome. It is this very distinction of theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action and the fact that they are split so that we can understand them, and yet they are paradoxical in that they are not split. This process of splitting is merely an aspect of our thinking moving, in the ongoing movement—what emerges is the reconnecting of what we have split so that we might understand it in its context rich, paradoxical existence.

### **Reflection and reflexivity**

The work with the General Manager and his team in Project Four illustrated and connected the process of reflection and reflexivity in the context of leadership

development and coaching. The changes that occurred both in my own work and the clients I was working with are captured in the narrative. What is salient is the connection between developments, the evolving thinking, and how (when it is connected to leadership development and coaching) it adds context to what we are experiencing. This also allowed me to make the connection and create the distinction in regards to sensemaking and making sense.

This idea of surprise/breakdown was in the narrative in Project Four around safety/risk management and was dramatically illustrated by the behaviors at the morning meetings when the safety issue of the day is read. The surprise/breakdown occurs every time there is a reportable incident. What surfaced through the narrative and reflective process was how the safety reading of the day had become thin, formulaic and reified; it was not connected to anybody's experience any longer. Safety and risk had become a concrete object that can be directed and managed. The accident emerges in the interactions between human beings, so it is paying attention to the human experience and connecting with that experience that will allow for improvement in safety and mitigation of risk. The key process here is reflection and reflexivity.

The connection is with practice (praxis)/practical. In the engagement of this knowledge emerging, and the pursuant actions we take based on the intentions that arise out of the emergent knowledge, there is a level of engagement that is experienced as the knowledge emerges and iterates in the micro interactions. Furthermore, there is an ongoing iteration of assessing and critiquing one's judgments as one defines and pursues a course of action (Antonacopoulou, 2010). This iteration of assessment/critique leads to a possible further iteration of reflection/reflexive thinking. It challenges the person to project their thinking back into their actions, thus changing both the practice they are engaged in and the capacity of being reflexive, in order to engage with the familiar in a new or novel way as if it was unfamiliar. This does not imply or raise some aspect of amnesia. On the contrary, as the human agent with the knowledge and experience encounters the familiar and approaches it in a novel way, he/she is eschewing a taken-for-granted approach. An example from the previous narratives would be the account of crossing a river, which is a very familiar task for me. I have crossed many rivers in many settings in various weather conditions

and at different times of the year so I have all this ‘crossing a river’ contextual knowledge and practical knowledge. Nevertheless, I still meet every river as a novel experience. It is the capacity to think about one’s thinking and to reflect on one’s reflection (Schon, 1983)

... both ordinary people and professional practitioners often think about what they are doing, sometimes even while doing it. Stimulated by surprise, they turn thought back on action and on the knowing which is implicit in action. (p. 50)

This reflective/reflexive capacity is a key component to connecting a person’s knowledge to their sensemaking and making sense as they lead. Reflection and reflexivity are key activities allowing us to connect the threads of the four projects.

In Schon’s work *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) he critiques Technical Rationality and looks at it from an educational point of view:

From the point of view of the model of Technical Rationality institutionalized in the professional curriculum, real knowledge lies in the theories and techniques of basic and applied science. (Schon, 1983, p. 27)

What he is illustrating here is the dominant way of thinking in education and the struggle he was having in relationship to practice in management where the consultant/practitioner was expected to choose the best applicable model, theory, best practice or rule. What he suggested was the idea of “reflection in action,” which he described as being composed of four parts: routinized action, encounter of surprise, reflection and new action (1987, 1983). Schon, I believe, was engaged in both sensemaking and making sense of the practice he was engaged in and through his narrative offered a more novel way of sensemaking. Schon’s work is merely a starting point to prompt thinking about reflection in action. I would argue he limited his approach by creating a linear model and that “surprise is encountered.” Surprise could also be interpreted as a “breakdown” in that something malfunctions—there is a disturbance and/or an interruption (Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009, Chia and Holt, 2006, Dreyfus, 1991, Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986, Heidegger, 1962). These might all be types of surprises/breakdowns and in a way we are reifying what we are experiencing.

The idea of breakdown was first taken up by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1962). Simply put, he was looking at our interactions with everyday objects and what occurs when they are interrupted; i.e., a door handle that no longer functions. The normal interaction with the door handle is taken for granted and when it works it is not noticed. When it does not work we become aware of the door handle and the interaction becomes transparent because of the breakdown. And now, we have to look at other ways of making the door handle and door function. Heidegger's work has been taken up analogically by a number of writers and connected with breakdowns in learning, communication, decision making, and so on. The important connection is that Heidegger points to this as a moment in which we engage in reflection and reflexivity, and allow for novel approaches to the breakdown we are encountering. It is taken up in this manner by Yanow and Tsoukas (2009), Chia and Holt (2006), Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), Koschmann et al. (1998), Segal (2010). Inherent in the breakdown is a level of surprise—we are surprised when the door handle does not work. We are surprised when an interaction leads to a different place; and surprise is an extension of this idea of breakdown and is connected to the experience of reflection and reflexivity.

Surprise is always present if we make sense of our experiences from a complex responsive process of relating; at times we deal with surprise with improvisation and spontaneity. Risk, spontaneity and improvisation are always available to us in organizational change, leading, and decision making. The actions we engage in consciously or unconsciously are around our own social enabling and constraining. When we are confronted with surprise our actions, either consciously or unconsciously, are to engage with the surprise/breakdown by assessing the risk. And, depending on how we make sense of the verbal gestures of our clients, or the groups we are in, or the inherent risk, our action might be a script, a model or best practice and we might respond according to a plan. Our second action might be spontaneity and improvisation. A third action might be a combination of starting with a script and assessing the risk of critique, which has the possibility of a spontaneous and improvised inquiry. The above appears to be very linear in that we are moving through well-calculated actions. The conscious/unconscious actions or assessment are all taking place at the same time. The novelty arises in the moment as we respond to

the verbal gesture being made by the other human beings who are responding to our verbal gesture.

### **Sensemaking and making sense as distinct iterative emergent processes**

Weick's (2001, 1993, 1995, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007) work on sensemaking and my own use around sensemaking and making sense, which had been used interchangeably in my first three projects, was experienced and thought about differently by me in Project Four. During my academic progression meeting, one of the questions raised was around my use of sensemaking and making sense and if these were interchangeable for me. I thought about it and answered 'yes' they were. As I have continued to reflect on this idea of how we interpret what is going on, I realized that for me, as I started Project Four, they are not interchangeable. I agree with sensemaking as Weick takes it up and defines it as something that is happening in retrospect with an idea of an outcome. He is basing this mainly on his understanding of how juries function, accident investigations or some other event that has caused a disruption. This offers a first order of sensemaking very similar to a first order abstraction. (This would be a narrative that one creates to describe one's day-to-day interactions). Taking this a step further there is a second order of sensemaking very similar to second order abstractions. (This is when we translate our first order abstractions into theories and/or models.) This second order sensemaking occurs when human beings are engaged in processes such as After Action Reviews (AAR), Root Cause Analysis (RCA) and debriefs. The outcomes of these processes are usually codified as Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), Best Practices, a theory or a new process. These processes and Weick's description of sensemaking in organizations are about creating contextual knowledge or metis and this connects with the theme theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action

The other aspect is making sense is very similar to what Elias is talking about in *Involvement and Detachment* (1987). Arguing my point about the idea of involvement and detachment, I am going to use the word abstract because I think it more closely describes what we are actually engaged in. If we are attentive to our day-to-day interactions, we cannot help but be involved—we are in them. There are then moments, as we are involved, that we abstract to make sense of what is happening. The iteration of the involvement and abstraction are happening at the same time. We

continue to be involved as we engage in sensemaking, and the sensemaking continues to change as we are involved and the iteration continues. All of this is happening in the living present as we are gesturing to others involved in our day-to-day interactions. Part of the challenge is to work with individuals in a group so that they are aware that this is actually occurring both consciously and unconsciously and, further, how they can be open to the novel ideas that might arise out of their making sense. The distinction here is that sensemaking is a retrospective glance to understand what happened, while making sense is occurring as we are in the process. When we are making sense we understand how we are sensemaking while being understanding and attentive to our own iterative process. As this is occurring it offers us the possibility of applying our practical wisdom in the iterative process. Much like Schon's idea of "reflection in action" this would be practical wisdom in action or phronesis. And again, this thematically connects to the themes in theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action. Sensemaking and making sense are not either/or (or both/and) rather they are iterating at the same time. And I would argue they are quite different and both necessary to generate the patterns that might lead an individual or a group to more novel ways of dealing with the issues they are struggling with.

They are different (even though they appear to be similar) in that they are both about creating an understanding of events that we are involved in and offering the opportunity for reflection and reflexive thought. Sensemaking is a retrospective narrative; making sense is what we experience as we create and share the narrative. This is a critical distinction and something that is not paid attention to in the day-to-day interactions. Further what is paid attention to and focused on is the sensemaking with the goal of generating concrete actionable information. Taken a step further if the sensemaking is not taken up with the making sense, the context of what is generated is not taken into account, which might involve political and organizational pressure, idealization, inclusion and exclusion, retribution, bullying, self-silencing, and so on. This further connected to what was brought up in the Introduction regarding theory and practice. In addition, by thought the following is intended: if we are paying attention to our thinking, our thinking might lead us to reflection then to critique and reflexivity. It is this key aspect of our thinking and the application of reflexivity that is

described as thinking about our thinking (Schon, 1983), injecting our thinking back into our practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), encountering the familiar as if it is novel (Antonacopoulou, 2010), and radical reflexivity as an unsettling or uncertainty about basic assumptions used to describe reality (Cunliffe, 2003, 2004, 2009). What this is illustrating is that, generally, in organizations we are practiced at engaging in the sensemaking and the output of “artifacts” by which is meant best practices, standard operating procedures, rules, process, and so on. What we are not engaged in is paying attention to our own making sense and the making sense that might be occurring in the group. This is directly connected to the splitting of theory and practice to the duality that is created in organizational, coaching and leadership literature. Both are occurring at the same time and iterating; theory and practice are ongoing micro patterns that eventually become macro patterns.

To take the argument a step further and to clarify, I am not suggesting that we would not use theory, codify and create best practices, create abstractions through narrative and sensemaking. All of this is occurring in our day-to-day interactions we abstract to understand—to engage in sensemaking and make sense of what we are doing. The connection is paying attention to what we are doing and what happens when we reify what is happening; and, do not pay attention to and attend to the reification’s we are creating. It is this act of reifying that leads human beings to experience a lack of recognition and an experience of the uncanny in their ongoing interaction.

### **Theory and practice of leading**

In closing Project Four I reflected on *how* we think and assemble contextual knowledge and use practical knowledge; our interpretation of what has happened and what is happening; the ongoing emerging qualities of sensemaking and making sense while at the same time reflecting and being reflexive, and experiencing the iteration of the movement of our own thinking; and, finally, how we are constrained and enabled by the hegemony of our practice and thinking, which offers us the possibility of making sense of leading as a practical activity. This theme of theory and practice and its connection to understanding leading, leadership, leadership development and coaching as a practical activity is connected not only to what I am researching, it has also informed my research and method as well as impacted the practice I engage in.



What I have been researching is embedded in the narratives, and the ensuing sensemaking and making sense that has occurred in each project. It is the iteration of theory/practice that has shaped my inquiry and, I would argue, led me to novel ways of connecting and interpreting theories that when combined offer the practitioner and client a different way/method/process of understanding their day-to-day experiences.

The connection to my research and method lies in the experience of the DMan over the past three years. Reflection and reflexivity, theory and practice are key elements of the experience and are taken up in a unique way. Examples of this are the community meetings, exploring key concepts, and learning at group meetings. During these different learning experiences the participants gain an understanding of the connection to reflective/reflexive thinking. In the community meetings, as both students and faculty labor to make sense of what we are doing together, the participants experience the iteration of how practice emerges out of theory and theory emerges out of practice.

... [T]he practice of effective leadership is that of participating skillfully in interactions with others in reflective and imaginative ways, aware of the potentially destructive processes one may be caught up in. It is in this practice of immersing while abstracting from the games of organizations that one is recognized as leader, as one who has the capacity to assist the group to continue acting ethically, creatively and courageously into the unknown. (Stacey, 2010, p. 217)

Finally, there is the experience of writing about practice through narrative, connecting to the relevant literature, and how one is able to experience the movement of thought and practice that occurs during this progression. In addition there is the experience that I had as a practitioner observing how my practice shifted over the past three years in writing and revising the narratives of each project while participating in the residential and the work that took place in my learning group. I will take this up further and elaborate on it in both method and in contribution to knowledge and practice.

In closing this section what I want to highlight is that in each chapter I was working with different clients in different settings. What emerged from the narrative is that the work I am engaged in (leadership development and coaching) is about both

the practitioner and the clients and how they engage with the experience they are having. In the end it is about the experience as inquiry. Whether it is some aspect of theory, some activity, an initiative, or a meeting, it is *how* we are experiencing the event and our subsequent sensemaking and making sense.

## **Method**

There are two reasons why a narrative research methodology is attractive to me and resonates with my learning style. First, I wanted to examine how some groups of people seem to function and generate novel outcomes that are satisfying to them and the people they are working with while for others it does not seem very satisfying and/or does not lead to outcomes that they would find satisfying. Secondly, the research is embedded in my day-to-day work. The research forces me to engage with practice (my day-to-day interactions) and method (how I make sense of those interactions). What caught my attention originally was Patricia Shaw's *Changing Conversations in Organizations* (2002) and the narrative about her work—how she was thinking about her work and making sense of it and her own reactions to her work and the client responses. What I experienced in my first reading was that Shaw put into words what I was thinking, while in reality I was unable to find language to explain what I was thinking.

As I engaged in the research and started writing Project Two, in my mind I had the general question I shared in the Introduction (“Why do certain management teams function well while others do not and how can I change that?”) and, at the same time, I was curious to see what emerged as I wrote the narrative. I had this idea that as I narrated my experience the burning question would emerge out of the narrative. This is not an easy way to do research. I thought back to my master thesis: I had quantitative data and I had set up a null and alternate hypothesis. Yes, there was a narrative and some sensemaking and yet, it was underpinned by an efficient causality (if-then), a rational causality (the observer has free will and choice) and a thinking of my work as a system, which I could stand outside of and impact upon or change what needed to be changed. The method employed in my master thesis research is in keeping with the dominant view of social science research in which there might be a narrative section and it is backed up by empirical data from surveys and other data that is collected as part of the research. The narrative arose out of using an Action

Research Method (French and Bell, 1999, Block, 2000), which I will contrast later on with complex responsive processes as a method.

The method I am using here is a personal narrative approach to organizational and management studies where I am one of the actors. In addition there is an ongoing iterative process that is embedded in each project and a progression of thought from project to project. Part of the method is to share the narrative and pursuant sensemaking with my learning group and faculty advisor, this is important because it offers an ongoing process of questioning and challenge. The reader will have their experience of seeing how my thinking and sensemaking evolved over the past three and half years. In addition, this requires the researcher to be both reflective and reflexive—terms that are, at times, used interchangeably.

The reflective part of the method arises in the thoughtful narrative of ongoing human interaction—taking experience seriously. It is this idea that Elias describes as involved detachment (Elias, 1987). Reflexive is sometimes taken up as a reflex or reaction (as with a muscle reacting to stimuli). Because the experience is defined as relating between self and others, the reflexive part of the method emerges in a) how the researcher takes up and reflects on how they make sense of their life history in relation to experience and how they reflect on it, and in b) how the researcher locates their way of thinking among the wider thinking and history of human interactions while being able to make critical distinctions between different ways of thinking about human interactions (Stacey and Griffin, 2005). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) take up the ideas of Giddens (1987) that we are able to “turn back upon” and monitor our own actions. They take it a step further with its link to social science in that the knowledge that is being generated is injected back into the reality that is being described. I would argue that this is also what Stacey and Griffin are getting at. Throughout this research, the thinking and knowledge are being injected back into the research, thus creating for the researcher a movement in thought that is impacting the ongoing practice and method.

The reflective/reflexive process highlights an aspect that deserves further attention and that is: the subjectivity of the researcher engaged in examining their own work. This is constantly challenged through the engagement with faculty and colleagues at residential conferences and in particular with one’s learning group (a

member of the faculty and several colleagues who are reading and re-reading each iteration of each project). They are challenging, questioning and reflecting with the researcher as to whether or not the connections that are being made, and what is being narrated, make sense and would stand up to scrutiny from a community of varied readers. It is the thick performance (Sergi and Hallin, 2011) of thought, reflection and connection and not just the thick description that engages and mitigates the issue of subjectivity. Qualitative research as narrative is going to be subjective by its very nature; it is in the ongoing process of researching other writers and thinking about and reflecting on the challenges that are presented that contextualizes the subjectivity and its level of validity in the ongoing academic discourse of qualitative research.

Narrative methodologies can be found primarily in the case studies that are used in research cases, educational cases and fact-finding cases that use a chronology to organize the narrative. This, for example, can be found in the case study method used at Harvard Business School and Wharton (Czarniawska, 1998). In this context the narrative has a specific purpose to illustrate a point and move the reader to specific conclusions about making sense of the narrative. Narrative is also found in qualitative research (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and it has been drawn on as a way of creating sensemaking in organizational research (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001, O'Leary and Chia, 2007, Cunliffe et al., 2004, Cunliffe, 2003, 2004, Weick, 1995, 2001, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). The narrative method I am engaged in offers the reader a way of making sense of the narrative. It invites the reader to examine their own taken-for-granted thinking as I examine mine, and as I engage in a reflective and reflexive process it also invites the reader to do the same. There is not necessarily a right or wrong way of making sense of the micro interactions in the narrative rather there is an invitation to the reader to examine if this is a reasonable and generalizable way of making sense of the narrative. The narrative in this case is taking experience and transforming it into inquiry, very much in the way Dewey reflected on experience as a form of inquiry (Dewey, [(1925)1958], [(1910) 2009]); it is also engaged with in this way by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Ramsey (2005) and Cohen (2007). In addition, in his reflection on experience, Dewey also had a particular view of human experience; he saw human experience as being personal and social at the same time. People are individuals and need to be understood as such and

they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always relating in a social context (Dewey, [(1910) 2009], [(1925)1958]). In keeping this in mind it highlights the importance of using a narrative methodology that takes experience seriously and looks at micro interactions that are taking place between the human beings in that narrative.

There is also an ethics component to the research that needs to be engaged. At the outset I filled out and submitted an ethics proposal, the premise is that I will secure permission from the persons involved in the research. This relies on a method that is predictable and I would be able to describe the process in advance. With the nature of the research of the D.Man one cannot know who is going to be involved and, for that reason, how it cannot be predicted in advance. Even with the use of pseudonyms, a person familiar with my work would be able to rename the actor. The research is written about people and actions that are occurring in their day-to-day work life.

I have chosen to engage with this issue in a three-step approach: 1) Clients in my consultancy - I inform them that I might be writing about the work we do together in a narrative form and as part of that narrative there is reflection and sensemaking embedded in the narrative. I have offered to share the narrative if they are involved in it. 2) In my work at NOLS - I have informed the director of NOLS Professional training that I might be writing about my work with different groups and that once completed I would be happy to share it. I have done this in Project Three. 3) Finally, I have also asked a number of colleagues who are organizational consultants and faculty at another university to read through the project to see a) if there are any glaring ethical issues that show up in the narrative and b) if what I am writing and making sense of is generalizable to the general community of Organizational Development Consultants.

Czarniawska (1998, 2004) argues for letting go of quantitative research methods in favor of a qualitative or narrative method. She argues that in the narrative itself there is the possibility of contradictory themes being present at the same time that highlight the paradoxes that are present in everyday organizational life. The daily work of management writers and researchers, she argues, is to remove the paradox through the use of a quantitative approach, which I would argue is underpinned by an

efficient and rationalist causality. Even though Czarniawska argues in favor of the use of narrative, it is not the same as narrating from a viewpoint of complex responsive processes in which taking experience seriously is a key component. Complex responsive processes are a way of thinking about those interactions as we reflect on our experience—in this case within the organization.

Above I have looked at narrative methods and how they might contrast with my own research and narrative method and I think the critical differences are taking experience seriously, being reflective and reflexive, paying attention to the day-to-day interactions, especially the particular, and using complex responsive processes as a way of thinking of the interactions in the narrative out of which a practice and method might arise. In addition I think it would be worthwhile to look at Action Research as Method (French and Bell, 1999, Block, 2000). Based on my experience and use of this method in my master's research, I can reflect on the following similarities: a) focusing on the day-to-day interactions and a narration of those experiences, b) attending to theory and practice while avoiding the split of the two, c) reflecting on my participation and the relationships I was involved with in the research, d) concern with what emerges in the process of the research, and that e) both are about a theory of social action. So the question becomes: If they appear as similar, how are they different as a method of research?

Here is how the similarities above have actually created a difference and, in grappling with this difference, how my thinking has moved. First there was a focus on the day-to-day interactions and the narrating of those experiences. In my present research the focus has been on the particular, the micro interaction, and how out of this emerges a way of making sense of what is happening. Second, in attending to theory and practice and avoiding the split of the two, it is about understanding the iteration that occurs between theory and practice and how this iterative process is ongoing and is aided by our own reflexivity—the idea that we are constantly bending back on ourselves. Third, in reflecting on my participation and the relationships I was involved with in the research, how in Action Research I reflected on it while in complex responsive processes, as a way of thinking about and understanding interactions, I am making sense of how I am both being formed and forming the interactions I am engaged in (the ongoing emergent social interactions that are part of

everyday life). Fourth, the research process is emergent. Emergence is experienced as a disciplined process of ongoing constraining and enabling between the researcher and the human beings being researched, and the faculty and fellow colleagues in the program. It is this emergence of the research and occurring interactions that furthers the reflective/reflexive process.

The reflective/reflexive process is connected with Dewey's reflection on experience, how he made sense of experience, and emerging from his particular view of human experience as being personal and social at the same time: people are individuals and need to be understood as such; they cannot be understood only as individuals; they are always in relation in a social context. This was taken up by Dewey ([1910] 2009), ([1925] 1958) and Elias (1978), (1991, [1939] 2000). In keeping with this view, an aspect or technique of the method employed at the D.Man is paying attention to what we are doing together and individually as we explore key concepts, engage in the community meetings, and participate in the learning group. What all of these different settings served to highlight was how our experience was both personal and social at the same time. And further, that the idea that learning emerges in the combination of the personal and social, and that in taking our experience seriously it offers us the opportunity to pay attention to what we are doing individually and together at the same time.

What are the assumptions that complex responsive processes are asking us to reflect on and think of? The crux is that it takes experience seriously and that experience resides in the particular—the micro interactions that we are engaged in our daily lives. This view emerges out of the idea that there is not a duality between the individual and the social; there is an ongoing iteration that plays itself out and in this iteration that the self and the mind all emerge in the social. This is what I have been arguing in my making sense of leading, decision making, dealing with conflict, and so on, there is an idealization of how to engage in these activities and a great deal of the current writing deals with these interactions at the macro level rather than the micro level. In addition I have argued that these have an underpinning arising out of natural sciences leading to a taken-for-granted, unexamined causality of certainty.

In drawing on the complexity sciences as an analogy, what plays out in the narrative, as one makes sense of the particular, is the possibility that novelty can

emerge, small variances can become amplified, and patterns that emerge cannot be predicted in advance. This leads to an important understanding in making sense of one's experience: mainly, that there is no orchestrated plan and, on the contrary, self-organization is ongoing. Creating patterns, which first emerge at the micro level and will impact the macro patterns at some point, and an ongoing focus on human interaction itself make the possibility of some external agency or imagined whole redundant. What is present is the paradoxical nature of human interaction and how we are being formed and forming the interaction at the same time. This leads to a different understanding or experience of time and the shift from a spatial to a temporal understanding of time where the present, past and future are being formed, reformed and emerging in our ongoing interactions. It moves away from the concept of an idealized whole and the idea that boundaries or levels are present and it asks us to think in the paradoxical in that there are no levels of differentiation between the individual and our constructs of group, organization, and society. Rather there are ongoing iterations of enabling and constraining, inclusion and exclusions, and those patterns as we abstract from them to engage in making sense are expressed as first and second order abstractions which might be called group, organization, and so on. We are asked to make sense of how we experience this, not how to resolve the paradoxes of our ongoing human interactions.

In summary the method employed in my research is a narrative methodology that takes experience seriously and looks at micro interactions that are taking place between the human beings in that narrative. The process of research is both reflective and reflexive and complex responsive processes are a way of thinking about the interactions that are taking place in the narrative.

### **Contribution to Knowledge and Practice**

In reviewing the themes of the four projects and further expanding upon some key areas, I have identified the following four areas in which I am making a contribution to knowledge and practice: 1) social interactions and the emergence of knowledge in action; 2) sensemaking and making sense as key components of leadership development and coaching; 3) reification, struggle for recognition and the uncanny as key constrainters of day-to-day activities; and 4) understanding of time and the underpinnings of causality.



## **Social interactions and the emergence of knowledge in action**

Knowledge emerges, is reproduced and transformed by the process of interaction among human beings. I am not suggesting, as I have addressed previously in my projects, that we throw out theories, standard operating procedures, best practices or other codified knowledge. Rather, what I have been writing about is this connection of the individual and the social offered earlier by Dewey ([1910] 2009), [(1925)1958]).

What is being researched and made sense of is how we connect to knowledge and create knowledge for ourselves and the groups we are involved in, and, as this knowledge emerges, how it gets translated into action. I realize that this is as old as Aristotle and what I am highlighting is how in leadership training and coaching we are focused on the theory, the model, the evidence and the best practice. What is being called attention to is the opportunity for both practitioner and the client/s to take their experience seriously, to pay attention to the particular (to the micro interactions that are arising between human beings) and from this the patterns that emerge (to impact on the experience that the participants themselves are having), and how both the patterns that the human beings are creating (as well as the population-wide patterns that are or have been created) are also impacting what is going on between practitioner and participants.

When we are able to pay attention to the above, to be both involved in what we are doing and at the same time to become detached (what Elias (1987) refers to as involved detachment or a “detour via detachment” (Mowles, 2011)), what is critical to realize is that they are the same practice.

As tools of thinking, therefore, ‘involvement’ and ‘detachment’ would remain highly ineffectual if they were understood to adumbrate a sharp division between two independent sets of phenomena. They do not refer to two separate classes of objects; used as universals they are, at best, marginal concepts. (Elias, 1987, p. 69)

In choosing to take experience seriously and to pay attention to how we are involved and detached at the same time to make sense of our experience, we are creating knowledge and action at the same time. The knowledge and action are occurring as the same process and iterating as we engage in our day-to-day activities.

As this patterning emerges it is also how knowledge in action arises. The clarification I would add is that this pattern of emerging is not a free-for-all; rather, it is a disciplined process that is informed by the enabling and constraining that occurs between human beings as they engage in the ongoing exchange of verbal and non-verbal gestures (Mead, 1934). What is being underscored for my fellow practitioners is to pay attention to their day-to-day interactions with their clients, take this experience seriously for themselves and their clients, and in so doing to pay attention to the knowledge in action that is occurring between practitioners and participants in leadership development and coaching. This offers the practitioner the opportunity to make explicit what might be occurring implicitly, and for both the practitioner and the client/s to examine what knowledge is arising as they are interacting. Finally, it holds practitioner and client to account to examine their taken-for-granted thinking and or approaches.

### **Sensemaking and making sense as key components of leadership development**

The idea of sensemaking in organizations and organizational life is taken up and extensively written about by Weick (2001, 1993, 1995, 2009, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007).

What I am looking at and connecting is his work on what is happening between human beings as they are engaged in sensemaking. It might seem obvious that we would pay attention to and write about what is actually happening between the participants, and what is being identified is how involved participants and current writers are focused on the outcome of the sensemaking. What is important are the theories, changes in standard operating procedures, best practices, and so on. What is not taken up is how participants are paying attention to what they are doing together to generate the outcomes.

I am not suggesting that we do not generate the theories, changes in standard operating procedures, best practices, and so on. The emphasis is that if we are not paying attention to what we are doing together and how we are generating these outcomes, we will miss a whole portion of information which impacts the outcomes: the paying attention to what is happening between human beings in the living present

and the involvement and detachment that is constantly playing itself out for each participant as they work at understanding what is going on. The distinction that is being created here is, making sense. This was taken up in Project Four; sensemaking is a retrospective while making sense is happening as the interactions are playing themselves out.

The connection that is being made, and what is being highlighted, is that a primary focus of leadership development and coaching is to work with the participants and to offer them specific tools and techniques. Again, there is not an advocacy that practitioners not do this. Rather what is being illustrated is that this will lead to thin, formulaic, cybernetic generalizations if this is the only context. The connection from the narratives was for the practitioner to work with the client/s and examine what they are doing together as they generate the outcomes of the training/coaching. The combination of sensemaking and making sense offers both the practitioner and the participant the opportunity to examine and experience risk, novelty and the possibility of thick, rich, novel, context-specific knowledge, and applications.

The reason this is being highlighted is not that we are not aware of this, or that we might not do it at times, rather it is questioning what prevents us from engaging in making sense frequently and consistently and why is sensemaking engaged with frequently and consistently in organizations? Making sense of what it is that we think we are doing together and what is going on between us is not necessarily something human beings want to talk about because it raises questions of and issues around identity, sense of self, power dynamics, inclusion/exclusion, and holding oneself and others to account, which many individuals and groups experience with anxiety and conflict. The need is for both practitioner and client to engage with sense making to offer the possibility of increased overall functioning in theory and practice.

### **Reification, struggle for recognition and the uncanny as breakdowns of day-to-day activity**

Reification, the struggle for recognition and the uncanny are all ideas and knowledge that are available and have already been contributed to the general field of knowledge. The connection I am making to organization understanding is how these

contribute to knowledge and practice and, in so doing, how they offer the practitioner an additional way of making sense of what may be happening with human beings in organizations. In addition, they connect with the work in leadership development and coaching. This impacts leadership development and coaching because it gives the participants and practitioners the opportunity to make this explicit. It offers leaders, managers, and consultants the opportunity to interact skillfully in a reflective and imaginative way when exploring the day-to-day activities and patterns that are arising. In doing this they have the capacity to move the group they are working with to make sense of what might be happening between them.

These three concepts are constrainers of day-to-day activity because they occur with frequency and as background to what we are engaged in. In our day-to-day activities we reify any number of interactions, occurrences, and phenomena. We are not conscious of the fact that we are turning all of this into concrete objects that we then talk about and interact upon as if we actually had some control over them. For instance some aspects of “systems thinking” are both an abstraction and a reification of how we think about what is happening in organizations and treated in a taken-for-granted way as a concrete object. I am not suggesting that we do not do this, as reification can be useful. What I am highlighting is the lack of awareness around our action and that, in doing this and losing the genesis of the interactions especially in paying attention to the micro interaction, we constrain ourselves by the belief that what we have reified we can actually manage, move or control.

In the struggle for recognition it is both the seeking and giving of recognition that enables and constrains our actions. In the context of leadership development and coaching it is the awareness of this acknowledgement granting and seeking that takes place between the practitioner and the client/s that is a key to paying attention to the micro interactions that are taking place. In addition the patterns of recognition or lack thereof that play themselves out between practitioner and client/s will have similarities to the same micro patterning that is taking place in the organization where these human beings are working. The constraining aspect occurs in how we make sense of the acknowledgment we are receiving or not receiving, granting or not granting, and it is the lack of attention to this that eventually constrains us in our day-to-day activities. What is critical here is that this struggle for recognition is not made

explicit or talked about, it is rather a phenomenon that is occurring as background noise. We know something is amiss, not quite right, but we cannot pinpoint it. It is uncanny.

The uncanny as a concept and idea coming out of Freud's (1919 / 2003) work has a direct connection to organizational life as we experience it today and try to make sense of our day-to-day interactions. There is the aspect of being in a familiar setting or relationship and at the same time it is unfamiliar. In the narrative of day-to-day organizational life we will chalk it up to something is amiss or not quite right; there is not language to address this. My argument is that we experience the uncanny especially when we return to our work setting after a leadership development sojourn or a coaching session. The setting is familiar; the people are the same; and yet it is slightly unfamiliar. It is unfamiliar because the people have continued to interact, the patterns have continued and evolved, decisions have been made, and so on—the pattern that the person is re-entering is different. There has also been a change in patterns for the client/s who have participated in leadership development and coaching who return with these new patterns creating an aspect of the uncanny for the people who have not participated in any outside development.

In addition, reification and the struggle for recognition as ongoing phenomena of day-to-day interactions that are not recognized and/or made explicit generate a chronic level of the uncanny. The combination of all three: reification, the struggle for recognition and the uncanny are key constrainters of day-to-day activities because they are occurring as background—unrecognized context influencing the patterns of micro interactions that are taking place between the human beings in the organization. These are forms of breakdowns and it is in the attentiveness to the process of a breakdown that the possibility of change and movement of thought might occur.

### **Understanding of time and causality**

Time and causality are interconnected in all four projects. In the dominant organizational and leadership literature, time is taken up, understood, and acted upon as a linear process as opposed to the living present that is an iterative process in which present, past, and future are interacting on each other. The main causalities that are foundational to the above literature are: efficient (if-then) and formative (already enfolded in the organism) causalities applying to the natural world and rationalist

(free will and the observer can choose) causality as applying to human action. These distinctions fall under the umbrella of a causality of certainty. The second is a causality of uncertainty emerging from the work on chaos models, models of dissipative structures and complex adaptive systems. The two identified here are adaptationist and transformative causalities. What I focused on in Project Three and Project Four were the rationalist and efficient causalities as the dominant causalities taken up in organizational and leadership literature. I contrasted that with the transformative causality and how I think they create a distinction in connection with current leadership, decision making and communication methodologies, and in how we make sense of our own day-to-day experience.

The importance lies in the fact that time and causality are generally not taken up in leadership development and coaching. They are approached in a taken-for-granted way and left unexamined. The use of time as a linear model fits well with an efficient causality, with a sender/receiver communication model. When the implications are examined and outcomes thought about, I would argue that it leads to a narrowing of one's thinking and possible choices. In thinking of time as a more circular and iterative process (the future being created out of the present that is rewriting the past that is creating the present) and connecting this with transformative causality, the possibility of more novel ways of approaching interaction is available.

I would like to briefly illustrate this from the point of view of a practitioner facilitating a leadership development day for a group of managers. If we take a linear time approach and causality of efficiency and rationalism, the facilitation would be enabled and constrained by the design of the day and the need to follow a schedule: deliver specific content in a certain order and that as the facilitator one needs to control, direct and make sure the participants receive the material. Taking time as the living present and using a transformative causality, as the underpinning to the thinking and design of the day does not preclude a similar time structure to the format above. By necessity there is a beginning and an end to the facilitation, the difference is that this practitioner sees this beginning and end as mere norms. The practitioner is acutely aware that the beginning and end only marks his/her particular involvement with this group on this day. The pattern started well before the group assembled and will continue after it dissolves at the end of their leadership development day; the

delivery of content would be based on the group and the facilitator taking their experience seriously as they made sense of their experience and as they enabled and constrained each other, they would or would not experience the content of the day.

In the first instance, the delivery would be based on the idea that an expert is delivering information (sender/receiver model) and orchestrating the experience and outcome. I would argue that both the practitioner and participants are having a reified experience. In the second the practitioner is constrained by a linear schedule and what may or may not happen during the facilitation in how the patterns that are present are engaged. The delivery of material would be based on the group and the facilitator taking their experience seriously; and as they made sense of their experience, as they enabled and constrained each other, they would or would not experience the material of the day. The experience is one of theory/practice happening at the same time and not one of ‘here is the theory and let’s practice it through an activity or initiative.’ Here the individuals in the group experience theory/practice by taking what is happening in the group seriously and thinking about, reflecting upon, and experiencing how one’s thoughts may or may not be moving.

### **Connecting knowledge and practice**

The above four areas of knowledge and practice are listed as separate and distinct items for ease of writing and they are all happening at the same time. In the fact that they are happening simultaneously, there are times that we are aware of this and times we are not. There are times it will lead to novel outcomes and conversation and, at other times, it might not just because we are unable to experience or understand the novelty at that moment. All of the above areas are not taken up in the dominant literature of leading, coaching and organizational life and I have argued and illustrated how they might be useful in making sense of our day-to-day experience in leading and sensemaking in organizations.

Dewey in *Experience and Nature* takes up the thinking on knowledge and practice:

There is then an empirical truth in the common opposition between theory and practice, between the contemplative, reflective type and the executive type, the “go-getter,” the kind that “gets things done.” It is, however, a contrast between two modes of practice. One is the

pushing, slam-bang, act first and think afterwards mode, to which events may yield as they give way to any strong force. The other mode is wary, observant, sensitive to slight hints and intimations; perhaps intriguing, timid in public and ruthless in concealed action; perhaps over-cautious and inhibited, unduly subject to scruples, hesitations, an ineffective Hamlet in performance; or perhaps achieving a balance between immediately urgent demands and remoter consequences, consistent and cumulative in action.... One lives on a conscious plane; thought guides activity, and perception is its reward. Action is not suppressed but is moderated.... Intellectual hesitation and reservation are used to expand and enrich the field of perception, by means of rendering activity more delicate, and discriminatingly adapted.

(Dewey, [(1925)1958], p. 314-315)

It is the combination, in its iterative nature, of knowledge and practice that offers both the client and practitioner the possibility, through involvement and detachment, to engage in reflective/reflexive thinking, which allows them to expand their perception and combine theoretical knowledge and knowledge in action as it emerges in the social interactions. It allows for the delicate perception and reflection in a discriminatingly nuanced way on the breakdowns that are occurring as reification, struggle for recognition and the uncanny are emerging in the interactions. It is in our attentiveness to both sensemaking and making sense as we are working with clients in a temporal setting that allows for the verbal gestures that creates a narrative of the emerging future and ongoing movement that is leading in organizational life.

## **Conclusion**

The crux is the connection Dewey made that experience is inquiry. This reframed for me experiential education, leadership development and coaching. When experiential learning is taken up in the field of leadership development and coaching it is about doing something engaging in an activity or initiative, applying a theory, and so on. Basically human beings do not actually have to do anything other than pay attention to their experience, their day-to-day interactions, and the practice they are engaged in. In paying attention to what they are doing, how they are doing what they are doing, attentive to both sensemaking and making sense and challenged by the



practitioner that is working with an individual or group there is the opportunity to think, reflect and be reflexive.

This all sounds as if the practitioner needs to do nothing other than to be present. Yes, they need to be present and, at the same time, skillfully participate in the above process by paying attention to what breakdowns might be occurring through the micro interactions between the human beings involved including the practitioner. What Dewey was pointing to and what complex responsive processes highlights are the experiences of all the human beings participating in the interactions and how we choose to think about them. It is through focusing on the experience, the day to day, that we have the opportunity through reflexivity to influence the patterns we are involved in.

The nature of leadership development and coaching as it is currently delivered relies on an underpinning of rationalist causality and linear time. The construct and expectation of what is delivered is that it is symmetrical, offering tools that can be easily and quickly applied regardless of context with the general goal being short-term technical fixes. What has been explained is that if we take up leadership development and coaching as an asymmetrical phenomena, pay attention to the thick, contextual day-to-day experiences/activities we are engaged in, ask both ourselves, the practitioner, and our clients to take experience seriously and pay attention to what might be emerging, it offers us the possibility of more novel ways of approaching our work, both as practitioner and client. This has been the nature of my research, in that by paying attention to my experience and the experiences of my clients as I shared in my narrative it offered both for myself and clients unique ways of thinking about, reflecting on and reflexively applying our emergent knowledge.

This dissertation necessitates by its very nature a conclusion asserting what is certain or can be applied to the body of knowledge. What I will leave the reader with is that for me this is what has emerged over three and half years of work. Through the enabling and constraining of practitioner and client/s relationships and through an understanding of complex responsive processes, novel ways of paying attention to experience have emerged. What is useful and contributes to knowledge and practice is our capacity to pay attention to, and think and reflect on, our experience and reflexively impact upon our day-to-day activities so that we do not need to engage in

some additional activity and/or initiative. For the practitioner/client relationship what this offers is the possibility of work that is grounded in the particular, rich in context, constantly emerging, constrained and enabled by the relationship and about the day-to-day practice one is engaged in. This conclusion is merely a brief punctuation in the ongoing iteration and emergence of the ongoing practice I am engaged in.

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## APPENDIX A

### Comparative Dimensions of Consulting Practice

	<b>Traditional Management Consulting</b>	<b>Organizational Development Consulting</b>	<b>Systems Consulting</b>
<b>Theory</b>	Scientific Management: Frederick Taylor	Action Research: Kurt Lewin	Family Systems Theory: Murray Bowen
<b>Knowledge</b>	Technical/Specialized	Organizational Process generalized	Natural/Family System
<b>Model</b>	Closed/Mechanistic Systems	Open/Organic System	Natural System
<b>Posture of consultancy</b>	Expert: Consultant manages consultancy	Collaborative: Consultant & Client manage consultancy together	Differentiated: Consultant coaches client toward managing self in system
<b>Problem Orientation</b>	Content	Process	Emotional process: content and process
<b>Identified client/focus of work</b>	Leader	Leader and group	Consultant/client relationship
<b>Consultant activities</b>	Problem-solving, advising	Action research; facilitating group learning	Defining self and coaching client
<b>Outcome Orientation</b>	Content problem solved	Increased capacity to improve organizational process	Increased overall functioning in content and process.