Second Edition

Leadership Development in Practice

A Complexity Approach

Kevin Flinn

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE

In an unpredictable world, how do we go about supporting leaders to develop more democratic and inclusive ways of working and living? The second edition of *Leadership Development in Practice: A Complexity Approach* draws on auto-ethnographic accounts of experience from practitioners across three continents to explore the leadership development approaches that best support managers to work with uncertainty by taking their experience seriously. It offers an alternative perspective on leadership and organisation for business schools, consultancies, and corporate training functions to adopt in their development of leaders.

Additions to this second edition include as follows:

- A new chapter on creating large group dialogue
- A more explicit emphasis on what it means to take gender, diversity, and social justice seriously
- A review of the burgeoning interest in complexity perspectives on leadership and leadership development since publication of the first edition

This book is essential reading for leadership and organisational development professionals, researchers, and students. It will also be of interest to managers looking for an approach to leadership development that works with how things are rather than with idealisations of how things ought to be.

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FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

In contemporary organisational life, it would be easy to come away with the idea that every organisational problem and every question of organisational authority turns on the topic of leadership. It has become a ubiquitous notion in most HR departments that everyone in an organisation, whether they have responsibility for managing others or not, needs leadership training. At my own university, I have been asked to offer a session on leadership for researchers, as though the average researcher requires this kind of development in their thinking in order to carry out their research. And the requirement for leadership development is understood to be different, and more privileged, than requiring management training: whereas managers keep things stable and transactional, leaders are capable of 'transforming' things and people. So, leadership development in organisations often involves these quite grandiose ideas about transformation, passion, courage, and vision which are on the one hand most edifying, yet on the other, they may be totally impractical, perhaps unreasonable, for the average manager working in an ordinary organisation. If you are a manager heading up a sales team, is it really necessary to wonder what Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King would do?

In this important book on leadership development, Kevin Flinn teases apart these accepted notions of what we might mean by leadership and questions whether it is so different from management. He then offers an alternative perspective on what might constitute leadership development if organisations are still committed to doing it, by weaving together theory, practical suggestions, and deep insight gained from more than 20 years spent developing leaders in organisations in many different sectors of the economy. Each chapter treats a taken-for-granted method for developing leaders and questions how they are taken up in practice. He deals with theatre techniques, reflective practice, coaching, action learning, among other methods, and then offers a persuasive critique of them. To do so, he draws on

insights from the complexity sciences, process sociology, pragmatic philosophy, and his training at the Institute of Group Analysis, as well as his experience as a student on the Doctorate of Management Programme at Hertfordshire Business School. Kevin has run scores of groups for hundreds of managers in many different organisations. This book shows the gentle but critical ways in which he encourages a deep reflexivity in the participants on his programmes. The book models the generative tension between, on the one hand, accepting that leadership development programmes are here to stay, but on the other hand, pointing out that they may then become vehicles for enquiring purposefully into the experience of trying to get things done together. It is an exemplar of the critical open-mindedness which he is encouraging in the participants on his leadership programmes. For these reasons, this is an important book for anyone put in charge of such development programmes, for managers who undergo leadership development, as well as for researchers interested theoretically and practically in what we can do to make leadership development more critical.

Chris Mowles, Oxford, July 2017

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Why a second edition?

> [Business Schools] should be equipping students with the critical perspectives and interdisciplinary knowledge to tackle traditional business assumptions and replace them with ones that better serve the holistic needs of the economy, society, and environment.
>
> *Oleg Komlik (2021)*

Since publication of the first edition, we have experienced Trump in the White House, the pandemic, seismic shifts in public consciousness (#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter), conflicts (both ongoing and new) too numerous to list, and the ever-pressing, 'it-can't-still-be-one-minute-to-midnight' urgency of the damage we are doing to our planet. More parochially, in the UK, we have lived through Brexit, four Prime Ministers, and six Chancellors of the Exchequer, all in the space of the last four years. Closer to home, soon after the publication of the first edition, I moved into academia full-time, initially with Hertfordshire Business School (HBS), and now with Liverpool Business School (LBS), where I am a Senior Lecturer in Executive Education. My interest in group analytic ways of working and the use of psychodynamic pedagogies in executive education has deepened considerably.[1] The influence these changes and events are having on my thinking/practice in relation to leadership and leadership development is the reason why I find myself sitting down to write this preface to the second edition.

What's new?

In Chapter 3, I highlight the growing number of publications on leadership that are drawing on the perspective of complex responsive process of relating

(Stacey *et al.*, 2000), an interest no doubt catalysed by the feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, and isolation that we all experienced during the pandemic. In Chapters 4 and 6, Eric and Sam, whose reflective narratives of practice I draw on to illustrate a complexity approach to coaching/psychometrics, and experiential exercises, respectively, have each contributed a brief rejoinder showing how their thinking/practice has developed since the first edition. And in Chapter 5, Henry, whose narrative of practice I draw on to illustrate the use of actors and theatre in leadership development, has contributed some excellent commentary to the original chapter. There is also, a brand-new Chapter 8, exploring working psychodynamically, with experiential groups in executive education, and the lessons that can be gleaned from the group analytic, large group perspective of Patrick de Maré, and built on by Teresa von Sommaruga Howard. Chapter 9, the final chapter, has been revisited, accordingly, to reflect the new content.

What's not?

My answer to the question posed in the introduction to the first edition – Why (yet) another book about leadership development? – still stands; the gap in the literature remains. Mainstream academic texts and popular management books on leadership development still (i) sacrifice depth for breadth, (ii) take methods and techniques at face value, (iii) focus almost exclusively, on the development of the knowledge and skills deemed necessary to make it as a chief executive officer (CEO) in a large corporation, (iv) continue to ignore, and in some instances actively avoid, the contingent, lived experiences of leader-managers, and (v) view organisations as systems that are controlled at will by a CEO, with or without the support of a small group of executive officers.

The thinking explored in the first edition remains relevant, and copies of the book continue to show up in people's shopping baskets. Its enduring appeal is a reminder to me that in as much as this is a new edition, it is not a new book. Nor is it an attempt to get purchasers of the first edition to reach into their pockets again. To use an analogy from the music industry, this is the digitally remastered version of the first album, with some new backing vocals and a new track added (which is available to download as a single for those who already own the original)[2]. In the remastering process, the production quality has been tightened a little, but the rawness, energy, and immediacy of the original recording sessions remain. So, bar the additions outlined above, and the updating of references for currency, most of the content from the first edition has been kept intact.

So, read on. Keep an open mind, adopt 'search mode', and remember the caveats outlined in the introduction to the first edition. Compare what you find on the following pages with your experience(s) and if you find something that resonates, and you would like to take the conversation further, then please get in touch. I would love to hear what sense you are making of what you find here.

Kevin Flinn, Liverpool, February 2023

Notes

1 Over the last five years, I have been engaged in the Group Analytic Society International (GASI) programme, *Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organisations and Society* (CLGD). The programme has been developed by Teresa von Sommaruga-Howard and is based on the group analytic, large group perspective of Patrick de Maré. And, conterminously, I completed a Diploma in Groupwork Practice with the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) to become an accredited Groupwork Practitioner.

2 Chapter 8 is a distillation of two longer pieces that were commissioned and published in edited volumes on complexity and leadership (Flinn, 2022), and leading in education (Flinn, 2023), respectively.

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Professors Chris Mowles and Ralph Stacey, my doctoral supervisors, who encouraged me to take my everyday experience seriously and introduced me to ways of thinking that not only provided me with a more reality congruent understanding of leadership and organisation but also the antidote to my growing disillusionment with mainstream thinking.

Professors Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw, who along with Ralph, developed, over a quarter of a century ago, the perspective of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating (Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2010; Mowles, 2011); the *complexity approach* of this book's title. Doug will not get to read this, but his influence can be found on every page.

Eric Wenzel (Chapter 4), Henry Larsen (Chapter 5), Sam Talucci (Chapter 6), and Chris Mowles (Chapter 7), who have generously allowed me to share elements of their doctoral theses and/or publications for several the vignettes that appear here. Chris Rodgers (Chapter 3) for permission to share his 'Management in five acts' framework.

Sally Graham, who introduced me to relational coaching (de Haan, 2008) and developed the Leading Through Coaching programme, explored in Chapter 4; a solid foundation that my colleagues, Helen Charlwood and Jill Lees, continue to build on.

Macarena Mata, Dawn Hudson, and Alastair Snell, my fellow collaborators in the development of the conversational approaches to leading that are explored in Chapter 5.

My Hertfordshire Business School MBA programme colleagues – Jana Filosof, Rachelle Andrews, and Yasmin Imani – with whom I work on the Leadership and Change module.

The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education colleagues with whom I have worked directly – Paul Gentle, Glyn Jones, Lawrie Phipps, Heather Thornton, and Alison Halstead – and the many others who I am lucky enough to engage with on development events.

The many managers who have participated in the management and leadership development programmes that I have been involved in during the past 20 years, especially those who have afforded me the privilege of reading (and assessing) their reflective narrative accounts of experience. These reflections illustrate the influence that involvement in the programmes that I lead has had on their thinking and practice, some examples of which can be found in Chapters 6 and 7.

The baristas of St Albans, Trebarwith, Mousehole, and Liverpool who served up the flat whites and lattes that fuelled many a writing session.

My wife, 'tricia for her unstinting support through my doctoral studies and the writing of this book, activities that have interrupted far too many weekends and holidays for my own liking let alone hers.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CAS	Complex Adaptive Systems
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CLGDOS	Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organisations and Society
CLS	Critical Leadership Studies
CMS	Critical Management Studies
DMan	Doctorate in Management
HE	Higher Education
IGA	Institute of Group Analysis
L-A-P	Leadership-as-Practice
LEG	Leadership Experience Group
LTC	Leading Through Coaching
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MSc	Master of Science
MSOL	Making Sense of Leading
OMD	Outdoor Management Development
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
RCL	Responding to the Challenges of Leading
RPG	Reflective Practice Groups
RPO	Reflective Practice in Organisations
TQM	Total Quality Management
UH	University of Hertfordshire

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION

If you are wondering whether to skip this introduction to the first edition, don't. Start with this, as it introduces themes that are referred to throughout the book, provides pointers for navigation, and establishes some caveats to bear in mind whilst reading.

Why (yet) another book about leadership development?

> Traditionally, researchers instructed practitioners how to do their work better. If we are to hold the assumption that practitioners best know the context of their work, this tradition must end.
>
> *Barbara Czarniawska (2014: 7)*

There is a gap in the literature on management and leadership development. This is because mainstream academic texts and popular management books tend to:

- sacrifice depth for breadth
- take methods and techniques at face value, offering little, if any, exploration and critical evaluation of the attendant assumptions and ways of thinking that underpin them
- focus, almost exclusively, on the development of the knowledge and skills that the authors deem it necessary to develop to make it as a chief/executive officer (CEO) in a large corporation
- ignore, and in some instances actively avoid, the contingent, lived experiences of leader-managers, and the plurality of contexts in which they find themselves
- view organisations as systems that are manipulated and controlled at will by a CEO, with or without the additional support of a small group of executive officers

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However, most people who choose a management career will never get to be a CEO, whether they aspire to be or not, nor will they necessarily get (or desire) to work for a big, global corporation.[1] Indeed, as Wilson *et al.* argue:

> [F]irst-line managers are far and away the most numerous amongst the managerial ranks. They typically have less organizational authority in terms of decision making than their more senior colleagues … however, they usually have the greatest amount of day-to-day contact with the non-managerial employees, who themselves normally constitute the bulk of an organization's workforce. Supervisory managers are, therefore, the most numerous and direct source of potential influence upon employees and, hence, leadership. Their importance [has] been largely neglected in leadership studies.
>
> *Wilson et al. (2018: 62)*

Moreover, the 'more abstract organizational issues' that mainstream authors and practitioners in the 'leadership industry' focus on – 'culture, identity, vision and strategy' (Alvesson *et al*., 2017) – are not in reality the issues that managers, including CEOs, actually find themselves struggling with on a daily basis. In my experience, the participants on leadership development programmes, whether CEOs or first-time supervisors, are exercised by the everyday political challenges of how to rub along with the dozen or so people with whom they most regularly interact (Flinn, 2011). Identity, strategy and culture, and the artefacts that purport to capture and articulate these things emerge in and from such interactions. Local interactions influence and are simultaneously influenced by the multitudinous patterns of local interaction that constitute the global patterning that we call organisation. This patterning can neither be predetermined nor controlled at will by anyone, irrespective of the degree of influence they may exercise at any one time (see Chapter 3).

Consequently, this book sets out to fill this void by exploring, in depth, a number of conventional development interventions that I, and the thousands of managers with whom I have worked over the years, have found useful for enhancing the capabilities that might help one to navigate more adeptly the everyday political contexts that one finds oneself in. Rather than perpetuating fantasies of heroic leadership and abstract conceptions of how leaders and organisations *ought to be*, I explore leadership as a social, relational, interdependent phenomenon and focus on how one might go about helping managers to deal with *how things are*. A complexity approach to leadership development involves supporting leader-managers to pay attention to what they are already doing. That is, making sense of the context in which they find themselves, reflexively thinking about what they and others are thinking and doing in that context, and making practical judgements as to appropriate next steps. Sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement (see Chapter 3) are capabilities that are available and useful to all, irrespective of the context in which we find ourselves or the seniority of role we currently hold or aspire to.

Why now?

> Leaders of every sort are in disrepute [and] the tireless teaching of leadership has brought us no closer to leadership nirvana than we were previously … we don't have much better an idea of how to grow good leaders, or how to stop or at least slow bad leaders, than we did a hundred or even a thousand years ago.
>
> *Barbara Kellerman (2012)*

This myth of heroic leadership – a myth that business school educators, management consultants, and corporate training facilitators have played no small part in creating and maintaining (see Chapter 1) – has long been problematised by critical management studies (CMS) thinkers and those authors proffering a social and relational understanding of human interaction. Similarly, the dominant view of organisation as system, a machine-like entity that can be manipulated at will by a small group of powerful managers (see Chapter 1), has long been contested by authors looking for more reality congruent understandings of the uncertainties and complexities that characterise their experience of organisational life. Given the threat that these views pose to the orthodoxy, it is no surprise to find them confined to the margins of the academy. However, recent events have seemingly brought them to the fore.

The endless streams of scandals, crises, and catastrophes in private, public, and charitable sector organisations over the last two decades have forced some mainstream academic and popular management authors to question the approaches to leadership development that they have been advocating, and the corresponding conceptions and practice of leadership that such approaches have helped to create (Kellerman, 2012; Pfeffer, 2015). Some have even gone so far as to accept that leaders, however powerful they may appear, do not (get to) control corporate futures. On the face of it, these two acknowledgements constitute massive shifts in mainstream thought and one would be forgiven for thinking that it signals some form of accord between conventional, critical and complexity perspectives. Job done! Consensus reached! Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth.

If this soul-searching signalled a true shift in orthodox thinking, it would be welcome, but scratch the surface and little, if anything, has changed. The old ways of thinking are still plain to see. So, rather than letting go of individualistic views of leadership and the illusory cause and effect certainties of some systems-thinking perspectives on organisation,[2] which are consistently and continually negated by real-world events, mainstream authors are merely recasting them in the language of shared/distributed/collective leadership and/or uncertainty/complexity. The arguments that accompany these seemingly huge shifts in thought tend to go something like this: command and control approaches that were appropriate in the industrial age are no longer fit for purpose in the new complex, global, knowledge-based, technological era. Consequently, something needs to change. However, I argue that this is not merely old wine in new bottles (de Haan, 2005), but rather the original

wine, in the original bottles, with the addition of new words on the labels. The marketing (rhetoric) may have changed, but the content (regurgitation of illusory recipes for success) remains the same.

Take an author like Jim Collins for instance.[3] For more than two decades, Collins has been researching and writing, often in collaboration with others (see the list of references at the end of this chapter), about what it is that makes businesses and business leaders 'great'. You do not need to know a great deal about the content of each of Collins' publications as the titles alone more than sufficiently illustrate the point that I am looking to make:

1992 *Beyond Entrepreneurship: Turning Your Business into an Enduring Great Company*
1994 *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*
2001 *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*

It is worth noting the wording on the dust jacket of *Good to Great* because it ably demonstrates the pervasiveness of this way of thinking on academic and popular management thought:

> Jim Collins is the co-author of *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, a fixture on the *Business Week* bestseller list for more than five years with nearly 1,000,000 copies sold worldwide. A recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award at the Stanford School of Business, Jim jettisoned a traditional academic career in 1995 and now works from his management laboratory in Boulder, Colorado. A student of enduring great companies, Jim has been and continues to be a teacher of executives in the private, public and social sectors.

2006 *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*

Then, following the credit crunch and the banking crisis of 2008, and several articles pointing out that many of Jim's 'great companies' had ceased trading, Collins publishes:

2009 *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In*

And most recently:

2011 *Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos and Luck – Why Some Thrive Despite Them All*

If ever there was a set of book titles that tell their own tale, this is it. Collins cannot ignore the fact that many of the companies that he categorised as 'great' subsequently ceased to trade. Nor can he ignore the fact that the characteristics which

he identified as guaranteeing long-term corporate success have, for many of the organisations involved in the research, patently failed to achieve this. Consequently, in *Great by Choice*, the authors acknowledge the uncertainties and complexities of organisational life. However, they cannot let go of the illusion of control, and this is aptly illustrated by the advice that they give in the opening lines of Chapter 1 on how to navigate uncertainty and chaos:

WE CANNOT PREDICT the future. But we can create it.

In contrast, this book explores what it means to take seriously a social understanding of leadership and a complexity approach to leadership and organisation development. This involves living with the uncertainty and doubt of not knowing a little longer, examining the underlying thinking and assumptions that inform one's sense-making, engaging with perspectives that are not found in the mainstream, and comparing and contrasting these theories and ideologies with one's lived experience – a process that I describe as *reflexive curiosity*, a way of thinking/working that I explore in detail in Chapter 3 and hope to model throughout.

Why me?

> There are no "barriers to entry" into the leadership industry; no credentials, rigorous research, knowledge of the relevant scientific evidence, or anything else required to pass oneself off as a leadership expert. Anyone and everyone can write a book, be a leadership speaker or a blogger, offer consulting and advice, or start a leadership-development or consulting firm. And there are days when it seems that virtually everyone does.
>
> *Jeffrey Pfeffer (2015: 24)*

In the following chapters, I will be drawing on my experience of working with mainstream and critical thought and taking a complexity approach to leadership development from my perspective as (i) a lecturer in a business school; (ii) an internal and external leadership development consultant in public, private, and charitable sector organisations; and (iii) a participant-manager. This last role is important because it means that I have experienced all the ways of thinking, the learning methodologies, and the tools and techniques discussed here from both sides of the flip chart, that is, as trainer/facilitator/consultant, and as a student/practising manager. This first-hand student perspective is often overlooked by, or is simply not available to, most authors in this field and I think it provides a somewhat unique view. Ultimately, of course, you will judge whether this is the case.

My working life spans 30 years. I spent the first ten years in various management roles and for the best part of the last two decades, I have been a leadership and organisational development specialist working with managers and management teams across private, charitable, and public sector organisations in the UK and overseas.

As a young first-time manager trying to make sense of my new role, I completed a post-graduate certificate in management studies, before going on to complete the Diploma. Later, during my early career in management development, I completed an MSc in Managerial Psychology. I spent the first half of my career trying to match my practice, as a leader-manager and more latterly as a leadership/management developer, with the conventional discourse on how things ought to be. Sometimes events conspired to convince me that I had somehow managed to do this, but more often than not they, and I, fell woefully short. Thankfully, before my growing disillusionment with the recipes, prescriptions, and latest fads contained in the dominant academic and popular management discourse peaked, I stumbled upon a perspective that helped me to make a better (and more reality congruent) sense of what I was being asked to do as a manager and as a leader of leadership and organisational development interventions – the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey *et al.*, 2000; Stacey, 2001; Griffin, 2002, Shaw, 2002; Mowles, 2011; Stacey and Mowles, 2016). This is one of the perspectives that informs the *complexity approach* of this book's title.[4]

In 2008, I enrolled on the programme that takes this perspective seriously, the Doctorate in Management (DMan) at the University of Hertfordshire (UH), and was lucky enough to have Professor Chris Mowles (the director of the DMan programme) as my principal supervisor and Professor Ralph Stacey (who developed the perspective along with Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw) as my second supervisor. The DMan draws on group analytic thinking (Foulkes, 1984) and to gain some understanding of this, I spent a year as a participant in an Experiential Group (2009) at the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) in London. More recently, I completed the National Foundation Course in Group Analysis (2014), which was part of the inaugural cohort on the Diploma in Reflective Practice in Organisations (2016), and by the time that this book is published I will have commenced two further years of study on the inaugural Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organisations and Society programme.

I am currently Head of Leadership and Organisational Development at UH, a member of Faculty on the Hertfordshire Business School MBA Programme, an Associate with the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Director of my own, one-man management consultancy business and, along with my good friend Sally Graham, I am co-founder of Connect to Lead, a not-for-profit organisation that supports people to lead, whatever their position in the local community. In sharing all of this, I am not looking to impress, but rather to illustrate that my challenge to the dominant discourse on leadership and organisation is based on many years of involvement and immersion in it, both as a practitioner and researcher. Consequently, my critique of mainstream conceptions of leadership and leadership development is not merely an intellectual exercise; it stems from the practical failure of mainstream thinking to explain my lived experience. Similarly, I hope to show that my engagement with the perspective of complex responsive processes and more latterly group analytic thinking has been anything but superficial. Thus,

my advocacy of a complexity approach to leadership and organisation is based on ten years of research, engagement, and practice.

So, in answer to the question 'why me?', I would say that after a decade of working from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, I can offer a radically different perspective on leadership development than that found in the mainstream. The complexity approach to leadership development that I explore here is a direct challenge to those programmes and perspectives that purport to take complexity seriously, but in my opinion abjectly fail to do so (Flinn and Mowles, 2014).

Some caveats

> I'm suspicious of all those people who say, "I've got this great unifying philosophy of life and this is what it is all about"… I think they just make up that shit to sound good. I don't really have any philosophy. Life is just something that you muddle through using whatever tools come to hand at the time.
>
> *Irving Welsh (2016)*

Caveat 1. I am not looking to convince you that the complexity approach that I describe here is the right approach for you. That is, there's no hope or misapprehension on my part that reading this book will provoke in you some form of conversion to my way of thinking. Dennis Smith argues that the 'game of intellectual exploration is most productive when the personal honour of the players is not tied to the particular model of reality they bring to the game' (2001: viii). He recommends that we 'should all be prepared to revise any aspect of our thinking at any time' and this 'means keeping our minds receptive and the "game" open' (ibid.). For Smith:

> Writers are most interesting when they are in 'search mode,' when they are becoming gripped by a strong sense of what matters in the world or how the world 'is' but have not resolved matters to their own satisfaction or become the agents for a formula.
>
> *(ibid.: ix)*

I am not the 'agent for a formula', I remain in 'search mode' and I would ask you to adopt this mode too.

Caveat 2. I am under no illusions that my practice is in any way an exemplar for leadership development in general, nor indeed for a complexity approach to leadership development in particular. I am not offering the ways of working described here as some form of 'how to' guide, nor am I suggesting that you should adopt any aspect of my way of working as your own. What I find myself doing with the people with whom I work, in the contexts in which I operate, is not something that you can take and apply to the contexts in which you work with the people with whom you find yourself interacting. Consequently, I am not inviting you to adopt my praxis, but rather to examine, question, and make sense of your own.

In the introduction to her book about rewriting the rules of relationships, the sociologist, Meg Barker (2013) argues that when we become aware of the limitations of the existing rules, we often rush to replace them with new ones. However, she suggests an alternative that does not involve 'either grabbing onto existing rules or desperately seeking new ones [and] this involves staying in the uncertainty of not having clear rules and finding a way to go on which doesn't require grabbing hold of anything' (ibid.: 4). I am not offering any recipes – there aren't any. You will have to find your own way, and this can only be done in relation to those you work with – your fellow practitioners, colleagues, students, and collaborators on leadership development programmes. In short, I am suggesting that as leadership developers, we have a responsibility to continually enhance and consciously draw on the capabilities that I am looking to support leader-managers to develop; namely, the capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement (see Chapter 3).

So, in the chapters that follow, you will find no 'best practice'. Instead, there is incitement to challenge conventional thinking/practice, and this is a stimulus that I hope will act as a catalyst for a review of your own praxis. However, should you also discover something that is generalisable to your own thinking/practice as a manager, student, teacher, developer (or any combination thereof), then that's a bonus that I will be happy to have contributed to.

Caveat 3. There are no short cuts. Developing oneself as a leader, and as a leader of leadership development, takes time. This does not mean that one should enrol on a three-year doctoral programme like the DMan, or complete three years of training in group analytic ways of working, but it does entail engaging in more than one or two workshops and the occasional conference. For example, as part of the work I do with leader-managers, I lead a programme that is spread over a year, with participants having the option of continuing for a further one or two years. Of course, I still find myself responding to requests from colleagues and clients for 'bite-sized' and 'one-off' leadership development events, and I am not saying that it is impossible to do something useful in these spaces, but one must be realistic about what can be achieved during such short engagements.

Caveat 4. I must accept that I cannot cover everything in this book. The thoughts shared here are based on my research, reading, and experience. I have not, and of course could not, read every single book, article, blog, and tweet that might be of some relevance to the themes and methods under discussion here. Indeed, having a chapter (or part thereof) to cover topics and techniques to which others have dedicated whole books (research careers!) means that I have not even been able to include all that I have to offer, let alone cover all that is currently available. Consequently, I have chosen to focus on the thinking that has influenced and continues to influence my practice, and the practice that has influenced and continues to influence my thinking. Any omissions are mine and mine alone, but I do hope to (i) do justice to the thinkers and thinking that I draw on here, and (ii) provide you with sufficient and sufficiently different provocation to stimulate your reflexive curiosity.

Who might find this book useful?

> Business schools should – with urgency – adopt approaches to leadership education that are more critical, relational and reflective.
>
> *Dennis Tourish (2013: 112)*

This book is aimed at leadership and organisational development specialists, students, researchers, and practicing managers whose experience of, and aspirations for, working life are not congruent with the accounts that can be found in mainstream academic and popular management literature.

It does indeed explore how we might go about incorporating the more critical, relational, and reflective approaches to leadership development that Tourish calls for above, but for me, this focus is far too narrow. In numerical terms, business schools play only a minor role in the education of managers. Most managers do not have the time or inclination to enrol on lengthy academic programmes, nor the financial wherewithal to attend the burgeoning number of executive programmes that business schools now offer as an alternative. Most managers who engage with any kind of formal learning access their leadership development via in-house training and development events, led not by business school academics, but by internal and external consultants working as, or procured by, staff in human resources departments. A minority of managers, usually those in more senior positions, additionally get to attend open programmes and events, run by specialist leadership development providers. And a select few, usually very senior or self-funding managers, will get to experience some combination of all three – business school, in-house, and specialist external provision.

Consequently, this book challenges not only business schools but also all those involved in leadership development – business school lecturers/researchers, leadership development/organisational development specialists, coaches, and participant-managers – to re-examine their praxis. This does not mean abandoning traditional development practices and ways of thinking out of hand, but rather paying attention to those elements of conventional thinking and practice that are helpful and being prepared to let go of those that are not. As a catalyst for this, I take a broadly critical look at a selection of the common tools, techniques, and methods of leadership development that business schools, organisations, and consultancies have been working with for many years, with a view to drawing attention to what is useful in helping managers to develop their capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement (Chapter 3).

I say *broadly critical* to differentiate the complexity approach that informs my practice from the critical (management studies) perspective taken by scholars like Tourish, quoted above.[5] Tourish, for example, is critical of transformational leadership as it cedes more power to the few without considering the damage caused by 'megalomaniac leaders who have become convinced that powerful, visionary

leadership is helpful, healthy, and wise' (2013: 7), whereas I am critical of transformational leadership as it bears little resemblance to my lived experience. Unlike Tourish, I am not looking to prevent the excesses of the megalomaniacal few – they will always emerge – rather I am looking to encourage the *moderate many* to engage in a more reality congruent exploration of organising, leading, and leadership development. For leaders, this entails paying attention to what we find ourselves actually doing and how things are, rather than worrying about what we think we ought to be doing and how we would like things to be. And for leaders of leadership development, it means supporting participants to enhance their capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement rather than promoting abstract ideas and ideals of leadership and organisation that bear little relation to our quotidian experience.

If there is an emancipatory intent on my part, then it is to free us from the fantasy of the heroic leader who single-handedly controls corporate futures. I contend that this would not only benefit the majority of leaders, the people they manage and the communities they serve, but it would also encourage the exploration of different perspectives, thus breaking the hegemony of the orthodox and reducing the potential for leadership development programmes (intentionally or otherwise) to continue to be little more than what Schein (1961) describes as a form of 'coercive persuasion', or more colourfully, as brainwashing (see Chapter 3). This involves reappraising the thinking, methods, tools, and techniques that are integral to us practice with a view to ensuring that the process of sense-making before, during, and after such interventions is congruent with our experience and the day-to-day realities of the participants and/or the people with whom we work (see Chapter 6).

To do this, we need to take our experience seriously, a process that I demonstrate throughout this book by drawing on reflective narratives from my own practice and those of others who have been taking a complexity approach to their work in Germany, Denmark, North America, and the UK. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the tools, techniques, and methods explored in the following chapters (although there are some notable exceptions), but I do argue that how practical they are in helping managers to go about their day-to-day activities, in a way that is useful both to them and to those around them, depends on the approach, focus of attention and quality of the attendant and ongoing sense-making. This involves staying with the experience as far as possible and avoiding the false certainty offered by abstract and instrumental models and frameworks (see Chapter 3).

The tools and techniques that I have chosen to explore are as follows:

- coaching, psychometrics, and 360° feedback
- forum theatre
- experiential exercises
- action learning sets

How to make the most of this book

If your predilection is to dip in and out of books, to quickly find the topic you are interested in and disregard the rest, then you might be pleased to know that Chapters 4–7 can be read independently and non-sequentially. However, I would also recommend that at some point, you take the time to read Chapters 1–3, as they provide an in-depth insight into the complexity approach that informs the practice/ways of working explored in later chapters.

In Chapter 1, I explore the history of management and management education as a means of understanding how we have come to think about leadership and leadership development, organisation and organisation development. I set out why writing this book is so important to me, and why reading it will (hopefully) be important to you.

In Chapter 2, I compare my current sense-making of leadership with some recent developments in management/leadership research, establish a working definition for the specific form of leadership that I explore in this book, and share how this influences the way in which we might usefully approach leadership development.

In Chapter 3, I establish a working definition for organisation, and the implications of this for leadership and organisation development. I also explore what the exercise of reflexive curiosity – sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement – looks like in practice and share how this capability might help leaders of leadership development to avoid their programmes and interventions from becoming little more than a form of coercive persuasion (Schein, 1961).

The succeeding chapters generally start with a reflective narrative from my experience: that is, a reflection on an incident that provided me with some insight into the difference between how I am working with the leadership development technique, intervention, perspective under review, and how it is more usually taken up in mainstream thinking/practice. And then following a brief, but often overlooked, exploration of the history/origins of the technique, intervention, perspective under review, I compare the complexity approach that I am taking with how it is more usually taken up on conventional programmes, illustrated with examples from my current practice and/or a vignette from a colleague/friend who is also taking a complexity approach in their work.

In Chapter 4, I explore coaching and the use of psychometrics in leadership development. I make the case for more discursive (Stacey, 2012) and relational (de Haan, 2011) forms of coaching/mentoring, in contrast to the instrumental and solutions-focused approaches found on most conventional leadership development programmes. I also compare the traditional use of psychometrics and 360°/multi-rater feedback in coaching conversations with the complexity approach. On conventional programmes, psychometrics/360° feedback tools are used to develop self-awareness, or an understanding of people based on 'individual-centred psychologies' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 47). The complexity approach understands people to be 'fundamentally interdependent' (ibid.); if psychometrics/360°

feedback tools are used at all, it is with a view to developing an awareness of self in relationship to others. I also compare conventional and complexity approaches to power and the shadow side of leadership and organisation.

In Chapter 5, I turn my attention to the use of drama, actors, improvisation, and forum theatre (Boal, 1979) on leadership development programmes. I also compare conventional understandings of communication, conflict, and creativity with a view from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating.

In Chapter 6, I look at experiential exercises, including simulations and (live) case studies. I suggest that there are some salient lessons to be learned from these experiences, but they are often not those claimed by the organisations and consultancies promoting such activities, ranging from ropes courses to voyages at sea. The lessons that are often ignored in such interventions are the opportunities to hone the capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement. I also look at how one might deepen the learning from such activities through the writing of reflective narrative accounts of experience.

In Chapter 7, I explore the action learning (Set) process (Revans, 1980). I contend that there are more similarities than differences between Revans' original philosophy and a complexity approach to group work, particularly when compared to critical action learning (Brook et al., 2016). I also explore how group analytic ways of thinking/working can be useful for understanding group dynamics and explore the parallels between managing and the group analytic concept of dynamic administration.

In Chapter 8, I reflect upon what writing this book has meant to me and I identify what is generalisable for others from what has gone before. I offer rules of thumb, rather than recipes, for what it means for us (as managers, students, and practitioners) to take a complexity approach to leadership (development) and to enhance our capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement.

So, read on. Keep an open mind, remain in 'search mode', and remember the caveats outlined above. Compare and contrast what you find on the following pages with your own day-to-day experience(s) and if you find something that resonates, and you would like to take the conversation further, then please get in touch with me. I would love to hear what sense you are making of what you find here.

Kevin Flinn, St Albans, July 2017

Notes

1 For instance, 99 per cent of businesses in the UK are small and medium-sized enterprises (Ward and Rhodes, 2014).
2 Systems dynamics, for example, takes a non-linear view of complex systems (see Chapter 3).
3 I highlight Collins (*et al*) because his publications span the best part of the two decades in which the many business scandals and crises experienced by Western economies seemingly forced some mainstream authors to reappraise their thinking and because the title of the 2011 book, written with Hansen, implies that he/they takes/take uncertainty/complexity seriously.

4 When I took the job as Head of Leadership and Organisational Development at UH, in 2007, I had no knowledge of Ralph Stacey or the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating. It was a chance meeting with Ralph (see Flinn, 2011) that led to this discovery, hence 'stumbled'.
5 For a more comprehensive definition of 'broadly critical', see Flinn and Mowles (2014).

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1

LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Leadership, management, and entrepreneurship

It would appear to be standard practice, in Chapter 1 of books on leadership development, for authors to outline their current understanding of leadership and leadership development and to offer some thoughts on organising and organisations, that is, the contexts in which these phenomena emerge and are played out. I promise to do this in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. This flouting of convention is not a ruse on my part to reinforce the fact that this is not a standard book on leadership development, but rather, and more importantly, it is an invitation for us to stop and consider how conventional perspectives have come to dominate our current ways of thinking and acting in relation to leading and organising.

Where did all the managers go?

> For many writers and practitioners, management has been superseded by leadership. Management is deemed to have failed and leadership is seen to hold out the pledge of helping achieve that success which management had earlier promised … Management is now to leadership what administration used to be to management – a necessary but not sufficient function in the achievement of organizational success.
>
> *Jackie Ford and Nancy Harding (2011)*

When I first started out in what is now called learning and development (L&D), over two decades ago, the process of working with managers to develop their practice was known as management development. During my career, I have worked in and with organisations in the mutual, private, charitable, and, more latterly, public

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sectors in the UK and abroad, and the only differences between what was initially termed management development and what is now called leadership development are (i) the replacement of the word 'management' with 'leadership' in the programme titles, materials, and marketing paraphernalia used to promote such activities; and (ii) the dramatic increase in the number of junior and middle managers attending these programmes. Learmonth and Morrell (2019) argue this shift in the language used to describe those in positions of authority, tracked by Ford and Harding above – from administrator to manager to leader – is not merely a question of semantics. They argue that the use of language, such as that of leaders and followers, 'creates and justifies a particular kind of relationship' (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019: 4), one that flatters bosses and flattens workers, 'hiding the more oppressive aspects of life at work' (ibid: 9).

In mainstream and popular management literature, the purpose of an organisation is generally assumed to be the maximisation of profit and the optimum way to achieve this is the pursuit of efficiency and standardisation – the twin pillars of managerialism (Shenhav, 1999[1]). However, when we look at the history of the development of managers, management thinking, and management education, we discover that there was nothing inevitable about (i) management's replacement of owner-entrepreneurs at the top of the organisational hierarchy (Khurana, 2007), (ii) the seemingly universal acceptance of managerialist[2] ways of working that have spread throughout Western and, latterly, global economies since the end of the Second World War (Shenhav, 1999), or (iii) the separation of leadership as something distinct and superior to management (Zaleznik, 1977).

Where did all the managers come from in the first place?

In late nineteenth-century America, as businesses expanded to become large-scale corporations, a new cadre of employees emerged, one to compete not only with workers for supremacy on the shop floor but also with owner-entrepreneurs for control of the whole enterprise (Shenhav, 1999). This 'new class of technocrats' (ibid.: 3), called managers, supported by, what were then, fledgling business schools, embarked on a legitimisation project that looked to establish management as both a profession and a scientific discipline, akin to medicine or law (Khurana, 2007: 3). At the turn of the nineteenth century, this project gained traction during the violent bouts of labour unrest that broke out in US manufacturing industry. In contrast to what were seen as the warring parties – business owners and workers – managers (mainly mechanical engineers) portrayed themselves as rational, neutral arbitrators in the disputes, working for the common good.

Rakesh Khurana's book exploring the development of management education in America from the late nineteenth century to 'present' day is entitled *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands: The Social Transformation of American Business Schools and the Unfulfilled Promise of Management as a Profession* (Khurana, 2007).

In the book, Khurana, who is currently Professor of Leadership Development at Harvard Business School,[3] contends that:

> [B]usiness education came to be an accepted and uncontroversial part of the university only through the vanguard of institutional entrepreneurs…who saw the need for creating a managerial class that would run America's corporations in a way that served the broader interests of society rather than the narrowly defined ones of capital or labour.
>
> *Ibid.: 4*

This perspective is echoed by Cummings *et al.* (2017), who note that 'in the late 1920s and 1930s, key thinkers considered how the form of business school could be different from the narrow orthodoxy that was emerging' (ibid.: 327). Cummings *et al.* go on to explore the 'now largely forgotten' collaboration between the then Dean of Harvard Business School, Wallace Donham, and the 'British process philosopher A.N. Whitehead', who 'advanced a very different view of what a business school could be: one with a broader type of pedagogy that would not only inspire businesspeople but rejuvenate Western learning and society' (ibid.: 316). Yet, what came to dominate was a view of 'management' as a rational, politically neutral 'science' (based on mechanical engineering principles), practised by managers (mainly mechanical engineers), who are portrayed as those who are uniquely qualified to maximise profits by improving efficiency and standardising organisational processes (systems) for the benefit of society (Shenhav, 1999).

Khurana (2007) argues that criticism, debate, and political contestation of this 'narrow orthodoxy' were marginalised by large-scale manufacturing's contribution to the war effort. He contends that the Second World War 'generally softened Americans' historically suspicious attitudes towards large organisations and their management:

> Americans were increasingly enchanted by claims that the same technologies that had won the war could now be used to strengthen society. As a result, large organizations came to be seen not only as tools by which certain immediate objectives could be achieved but also as the means by which problems like "social" and "political tensions" could be rectified.
>
> *Ibid.: 201*

Harvey (2005) argues that irrespective of big business's new-found respectability, 'one condition of the post-war settlement in almost all countries was that the economic power of the upper classes be restrained, and that labour be accorded a much larger share of the economic pie' (ibid.: 15). A form of what Harvey terms 'embedded liberalism' emerged across the US and Europe where 'market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints' (ibid.: 11). An unintended consequence in the

US, of a constraint imposed by the government of the time, was the rise of the conglomerate – a form of organisation that, through mergers and acquisitions, combined a range of 'unrelated' businesses under a single company umbrella (Khurana, 2007: 208). Conglomerates emerged partly as a means of bypassing government regulations prohibiting the use of 'vertical or horizontal mergers' that would make it possible for an organisation to dominate a single industry, and partly as a way of increasing earnings per share, the measure that had become the stock market's 'key indicator of a firm's prospects' (ibid.: 208).

Khurana argues that the rise of the conglomerate, where 'a single executive was often responsible for ten or twelve different businesses [meant that] concrete, industry, or firm-specific knowledge and skills were devalued [and replaced by] the newer more abstract tools and techniques of rational management [that] offered an approach to success that operated without regard to industry distinctions' (ibid.: 209). Management continued to be characterised as a set of technical skills and knowledge that had a universality and transferability to all industries and sectors across the US, and this view of management and management 'science' (still largely based on mechanical engineering principles) continued to dominate US business school curricula. In turn, the US's increasing influence on the post-war global economy meant that it was not long before the perspective was exported across the Western world, with European organisations and business schools adopting US working and business education practices (Thomas *et al*., 2013), albeit modified to take account of what Djelic (1998) describes as the contingent 'national peculiarities' (ibid.).

Recovery and growth were strong in post-war Western economies. Indeed, during the 1950s, the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, told his Tory Party Conference audience that 'most of our people have never had it so good'. By the end of the 1960s, 'embedded liberalism began to break down, both internationally and domestically' (Harvey, 2005: 11), with unemployment and inflation surging, and growth falling. The economic downturn continued into the 1970s and company shareholders became jittery as share prices and dividends fell. The challenge that the management elite faced in this period was that they were charged with being stagnant, bureaucratic technocrats, who were not willing to make the tough decisions necessary to maintain profitability, and who had been churned out by business schools which were more interested in producing competent administrators rather than charismatic, visionary leaders (Khurana, 2007).

Where did all the leaders come from?

The subsequent search for an answer resulted in economic commentators and neoliberal economists scapegoating 'bureaucratic management'. Jensen and Meckling (1976) advocate the explicit introduction of the principles of agency theory, arguing that if self-interest is the best motivator, then the way to encourage executive managers to drive shareholder value is to link their remuneration to the share price. (Crouch argues that like 'many neoclassical economists, Jensen was perplexed by

the rise of corporate social responsibility. [That is] the voluntary acceptance by firms of obligations to customers, workers and, in particular the wider community' [Crouch, 2011: 105].) Shareholders agree and respond accordingly, incentivising executive managers to drive the value of the share price and dividends upwards, by linking senior management remuneration and bonuses to these measures. Khurana identifies this shift as the point at which the professionalisation project initiated by the early business schools, the first being Wharton in 1881, is abandoned:

> [T]he logic of professionalism that underlay the university-based business school in its formative phase was replaced first by a managerialist logic that emphasized professional knowledge rather than professional ideals, and ultimately by a market logic that, taken to its conclusion, subverts the logic of professionalism altogether.
>
> *Khurana (2007: 7)*

Depending on your political persuasion, the economic crises of the 1970s called for either more state intervention or less. Some called for the adoption of the interventionist economic principles of John Maynard Keynes, whilst others championed the abandonment of them and called for a move towards the 'free market principles of neo-classical economics', that is, the neoliberal economic ideas advocated by, among others, Friedrich von Hayek (ibid.: 20). Crouch argues that:

> Keynesianism's crisis led to its collapse…, not because there was something fundamentally wrong with its ideas, but because the classes in whose interests it primarily operated, the manual workers of western industrial society, were in historical decline and losing their social power. In contrast, the forces that gain most from neoliberalism – global corporations, particularly in the financial sector – maintain their importance more or less unchallenged.
>
> *Crouch (2011: 1)*

In 1977, Zaleznik, in what has become a seminal article, draws a distinction between managers and leaders. He argues that leaders bring inspiration, vision, and human passion, which in turn drives corporate success, while managers organise to make these things happen. Business schools, stung by criticisms that they contributed to the decline in economic fortunes, begin to echo this split. During the 1980s, they repackage their offering to appeal to those who see themselves as leaders, rather than managers or administrators; consolidating the distinction between leadership and management, adding to the justification of the burgeoning gulf in salary differentials that develops between CEOs/senior managers, middle managers, and employees. Between 1970 and 2000, the pay differentials between senior management and the lowest paid staff in US organisations increase from 20× to almost 400× (Mishel and Davis, 2014). Leaders begin to be portrayed as special individuals who can and do single-handedly shape and control corporate futures.

Management consultancies and corporate training functions follow the business school lead.

Management development is replaced by leadership development. Business plans become strategies, aspirations become visions, purpose becomes mission, and norms become values and cultures. Interestingly, as Stacey points out, although it is 'very highly paid executives at the top of any organization who are the ones really charged with the vision for the organization and the ones really supposed to change the culture…[they] rarely go on leadership programmes'. They are frequented instead by 'large numbers of middle managers' (Stacey, 2012: 75).

This echoes my experience, and I would also add that those senior executives who do attend development programmes are often well versed in the rhetoric of vision, values, and culture change, but this is not what they find themselves grappling with on a day-to-day basis. As mentioned in the introduction, the challenges that I invariably find senior executives wanting to explore are the same challenges faced by junior and middle managers, namely, how to rub along with the small circle of colleagues they most regularly interact with, while navigating the day-to-day politics of organisational life. Consequently, this book is concerned with leadership development activities that help manager-leaders to develop capabilities that will help them to do just that – activities that support the development of reflexive curiosity, that is, a capacity for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement (see Chapter 3).

Where have all the owner-entrepreneurs gone?

At the start of the project to legitimise management and professionalise managers, there were three identifiable sets of protagonists – managers, workers, and owner-entrepreneurs (Khurana, 2007). Before bringing this brief history of the social and political development of the dominant discourse on management, leadership, and organisation up to the present day, I want to briefly consider what happened to the owner-entrepreneurs. Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff (1991) describe three executive roles that occur in the 'theatre' of the organisation – managers, leaders, and entrepreneurs. They argue that all three roles will always be part of the cast, but the decision over which of these three 'archetypes' will be called upon to take centre stage will depend on the 'fears and hopes of those who create organisations by their daily performance' (ibid.: 529). For Czarniawska and Wolff:

> Leadership is seen as symbolic performance, expressing the hope of control over destiny, management as the activity introducing order by coordinating flows of things and people towards collective action, and entrepreneurship as the making of entire new worlds.
>
> *(Ibid.: 529)*

At the start of what Khurana describes as the professionalisation project, when managers first stake their claim to be recognised as the people best placed to run organisations, the other key claimants were the owner-entrepreneurs and the workers themselves. As outlined above, during violent bouts of labour unrest in the US manufacturing industry, towards the end of the nineteenth century, managers presented themselves as rational, neutral arbitrators, working for the common good, in contrast to the owner-entrepreneurs and workers who were portrayed as acting out of self-interest. In current mainstream accounts of leadership and leadership development, owner-entrepreneurs are still present, but there is little differentiation made between founders and those appointed to the position of CEO having had little, if any, involvement in the setting up of the enterprise.

I contend that the archetype of the owner-entrepreneur has become conflated with that of CEO. Although we still class business owners as entrepreneurs, it is not a term that we generally use to describe CEOs and/or senior managers. However, as outlined above, the differentiation between managers and leaders that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s characterised managers as those who, to use Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff's terms, introduce order, while leaders are portrayed not only as controllers of destiny but also as makers of new worlds. This view of leadership continued to pervade the dominant discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s, which brings us to the present, the twenty-first century.

As outlined in the introduction, during the first two decades of this century, the endless stream of business scandals and catastrophes, not least among them the banking crisis of 2008, encouraged (shamed?) some mainstream academic and popular management authors to question their thinking on leadership and the approaches to leadership development that they have been advocating (Kellerman, 2012; Pfeffer, 2015 – see Chapter 2). Some even go so far as to accept that leaders, however powerful they may appear, do not control corporate destinies. The mainstream justification for such volte-faces being that command-and-control approaches, that were appropriate in the industrial age, are no longer fit for purpose in the new complex, global, knowledge-based, technological era.

However, rather than abandoning individualistic understandings of leadership and the illusory, cause and effect certainties afforded by systems thinking, some mainstream authors merely recast them in the language of shared/distributed/relational leadership and/or uncertainty/complexity (see Chapter 2). As I argue in the introduction, this is not so much old wine in new bottles, but rather the original wine, in the original bottles, with the addition of some new wording on the labels. Multitudinous business failures, closures, crises, scandals, bailouts, etc. seem to have done little to dispel the mainstream myth. Take the title of Ashley Vance's (2015) New York Times bestselling biography of Elon Musk, for instance – *Elon Musk: How the Billionaire CEO of SpaceX and Tesla Is Shaping Our Future* (Vance, 2015). I contend that the tenacity of this thinking has something of what Daniel Kahneman, the psychologist, describes as the 'illusion of validity' (Kahneman, 2011: 209).

Speaking to Kirsty Young, on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, in 2013, Kahneman shared the following anecdote from his early career as a psychologist attached to the Israeli Army:

Kahneman: It was something we had inherited from the British Army, actually. It was a way to assess candidates for officer training. And there was a field test which involved taking a group of people and tell them to do something with a telephone pole, like pass an obstacle with all sorts of constraints, while we the psychologists on the side take notes. And what was very striking to me was that you could actually see the personalities; you knew what their true nature was like. And then every month we would get feedback from the Officer Training School and they would tell us how well we were doing, whether we could predict who would be a good cadet and who would not. And the answer was always the same; we couldn't. We had no idea what they were going to do. But what was truly remarkable was, you know, this was the Army, so we would hear on Friday that our work is useless, but Sunday morning there would be a new batch of recruits, we'd take them to the obstacle course and the statistics had absolutely no effect in reducing our confidence in our ability to see the true nature of people. And I called it the illusion of validity. That is, we felt we were valid, although we knew we were not.

Young: Can you give me examples of more situations where you could employ that phrase and say that's what's happening there?

Kahneman: The illusion of validity is really everywhere; you can see something very similar to it in the financial world where you have people who really know in principle that you cannot do better than the market but who somehow feel that they can do better than the market. You know, they are not hypocrites, they are not lying to anyone, they truly feel that they can do something that they know cannot be done.

Several years ago, I conducted a Leadership Experience Group (LEG) (see Chapter 7) for six senior managers, during a period in which their organisation faced financial difficulties, brought about by unforeseen and unforeseeable external circumstances. During the first LEG session held after the financial situation was made known, conversation turned to what the Executive Team should or shouldn't, could or couldn't have done to avoid the situation, and a member of the group commented,

'They don't seem to know what they are doing, up there.'

Most of the group, seasoned senior managers, were quite sanguine, with several commenting that the CEO and the 'top team' could not be expected to foresee the future:

'You couldn't expect them to know that this would happen.'
'I don't know what I'm doing from one day to the next, so I don't expect them to either.'
'They're just muddling through like the rest of us.'

However, the comment about not knowing 'what they are doing' got one member of the group quite agitated, and he responded with:

'I need to believe that they do know what they are doing. Even though rationally I know that it's impossible for them to foresee the future, I need to believe that they can.'

The myth of the autonomous (heroic) leader persists because some senior executives are happy to keep up the pretence that things are more predictable than they are, as this helps to justify, to them, the workforces they manage, and society at large, the colossal asymmetries in pay, privilege, and power that they enjoy. And some workers and citizens are happy to collude in this illusion as it relieves the anxiety that might otherwise be provoked by acknowledging that no one knows what the future holds. Alvesson and Spicer (2016) argue that deluding ourselves in this way is a form of 'functional stupidity', that is, 'the inclination to reduce one's scope of thinking and focus only on the narrow, technical aspects of the job' (ibid.: 8). They go further to suggest that once you are in the 'grip of functional stupidity, you avoid thinking too much about exactly what you are doing, why you are doing it, and its potential implications' (ibid.: 9). One of the antidotes to functional stupidity, advocated by Alvesson and Spicer, is the practise of reflexivity, thinking about how we are thinking (ibid.: 77). Reflexivity is something I explore in depth in Chapter 3, but at this point in the chapter, this feels like an appropriate point at which to recap what I am saying, why I'm saying it, and why this is important?

What I am saying

Drawing on the works of Shenhav (1999), Djelic (1998), Harvey (2005), Khurana (2007), Crouch (2011), Thomas *et al.* (2013), and Cummings *et al.* (2017), I contend that there is nothing natural or inevitable about the current way we organise ourselves in work settings. Leadership, management, and the ideology of managerialism are not givens; they are something that we co-create daily. The taken-for-granted acceptance of managers as those who are best placed to lead organisations and reap (what have become) very lucrative rewards has its origins

in the struggles between managers, owner-entrepreneurs, and workers in nineteenth-century America. This emerging cadre of employees sought legitimacy by promoting themselves as neutral administrators who were motivated to pursue organisational efficiency for the good of society rather than for their own self-interest (Shenhav, 1999). These claims are supported by the establishment of the first business schools in the 1880s, which looked to build the credibility of the new management 'class' by working to promote management as a science and managers as professional pillars of the community, akin to doctors or lawyers. The knowledge base for this new 'science' relies heavily on the scientific management (mechanical engineering) principles developed by Frederick W. Taylor (1947). At the time, these claims do not go unchallenged, but the contribution made by large-scale manufacturing operations to the First and, more crucially, the Second World War effort contributes greatly to the marginalisation of such views.

The success of US manufacturing during the Second World War captures the attention of European nations that were hitherto dismissive of US management thinking (Shenhav, 1999) and business school practices (Thomas *et al*., 2013). Post-war investment in US business schools by the Ford and Carnegie Foundations consolidates the development of management as a technical science, concentrating funding on research that is 'quantitative and statistically reliable' (Khurana, 2007: 220). The corresponding business school curricula and textbooks that are created in this period are slowly but surely adopted by French, German, and British institutions (Thomas *et al.*, 2013). The 'ideological assumption that human and non-human entities are interchangeable and can be equally subjected to engineering manipulation' (Shenhav, 1999: 197) becomes part of the dominant discourse. Management is portrayed as a technical skill that is transferable across industries (Khurana, 2007), leading to the rise of the general manager and the spread of managerialism across organisations, industries, sectors, and continents – view that are still propagated in mainstream literature to this day.

The economic crises of the 1970s and growing competition from Japan during the 1980s heralds a backlash against technocratic and bureaucratic managers and catalyses a call for their replacement by visionary leaders. This differentiation is made manifest in the remuneration of executive leaders. During the 1980s, executive pay increases astronomically, with the addition of share options acting as an extra incentive to drive profits and thus increase the value of shareholder holdings and dividends. Business schools, management consultancies, and corporate training functions reframe management development as leadership development, even though the vast number of students/clients/attendees is junior and middle managers whose chances of influencing business operations are marginal.

The many corporate scandals, crises, and catastrophes that came to light during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries push commentators to question the morality of the corporate leaders they were previously lauded, and in some cases honoured, for their business acumen. Acceptance that the world (of work) has moved on sees some mainstream thinkers like Jim Collins (Collins and Hansen,

2011) calling for a new leadership for the new complex, global, knowledge-based, technological age. However, rather than taking complexity seriously, an approach explored throughout this book, mainstream authors talk of simplifying and/or managing complexity (Morieux and Tollman, 2014).

Why this is important

First, the development of leadership/management, management thinking, and management education was not an evolutionary process of linear progression as is portrayed in mainstream literature and conventional leadership and leadership development programmes. Rather, it was a complex, and in many cases, dialectical toing and froing between conflicting ideologies that continues to this day. In addition, conventional thinking is a taken-for-granted way of thinking about leadership and organisation that goes uncontested in mainstream discourse, thus rendering opaque the intense political and ethical implications of the managerialist and neoliberal ideologies on which it is based. Conventional explanations of leadership and organisation thus (wittingly or unwittingly) cover over the shadow side of organisational life. Leadership/management is seen as neutral activity for the common good, and the often cruel and potentially destructive aspects of organisational life are glossed over or ignored.

Second, this is important because in mainstream discourse organisations have come to be seen as systems that are envisioned, designed, and manipulated by powerful leaders who instrumentally apply the scientific management principles of standardisation and efficiency to bring about certain and predictable outcomes aimed at the maximisation of profits. Of course, organisations can be greatly influenced by powerful leaders, and standardisation and efficiency projects do contribute to profitability, but there is nothing inevitable, predictable, or certain about such outcomes. For every business leader who claims success to be the result of good planning, there will be another who pursues the same course of action only to find that despite all their efforts, sales drop, profits decline, share prices fall and bankruptcy ensues.

The inadequacy of rational, linear, instrumental systems' perspectives in accounting for our lived experience has witnessed a surge of interest in complexity perspectives. Notions like VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) (Lawrence, 2013) are now commonplace in the mainstream, and there is even a growing acceptance that many of the situations that we find ourselves in as managers are paradoxical (Bolden *et al*., 2016). However, although some mainstream thinkers now bandy about terms like uncertainty and complexity (Collins and Hansen, 2011), they offer nothing new. In contrast, the complexity perspective that I draw on, and corresponding complexity approach that I explore here, proffers a very different understanding of uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and paradox and what this might mean, then, for our practice as leaders and leadership developers.

Third, this is important because it is useful to remind ourselves that the original professionalisation project that business schools initiated at the end of the nineteenth century acknowledged leadership/management as a social, relational, and interdependent phenomenon where one size didn't fit all, and the development of character and notions of stewardship were at least as important as the pursuit of technical capabilities. However, as Shenhav (1999) argues, the early twentieth-century 'project of standardisation and systemization … blurred the distinction between the social and the technical', which in turn allowed managers and business schools to 'expand the province of mechanical engineering to additional terrains' (ibid.: 196–197). Over the last 40 years, managerialism has swept through the private, public, and charitable sectors. In recent times, the scandals and crises that have come to light have catalysed the call, at least in some quarters, for more accountable leadership, a return to the ideas and ideals of stewardship (Khurana, 2007), and an acknowledgement that leadership is a social, relational, and interdependent phenomenon (Shenhav, 1999).

Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff's (1991) characterisation of leadership as performance – something transient that emerges between the actor and the audience rather than something that exists outside of the theatre – is useful in this regard. Here, leadership is seen as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a reified 'it'. Similarly, Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff's understanding of organisation, that is, something that we create in 'daily performance' echoes the understanding proffered by the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, which understands organisation as the patterning of day-to-day interactions (complex responsive processes) between people (of relating). This perspective has radical implications for our understanding of organisations and hence the role and influence of leader-managers. I introduce and explore this perspective in more detail in Chapter 3.

And fourth, this is important because exploring the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which mainstream thinking developed illustrates the timeless importance of reflexive curiosity, that is, sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement: capacities that I support managers to develop and that I explore in some detail in Chapter 3. Khurana argues that standardisation and the adoption of mechanical engineering principles attempted to establish management as a science rather than an art based on lived 'experience, improvisation and "rules of thumb"' (Khurana, 2007: 59). Managers all too often enrol on leadership development programmes looking for recipes, prescriptions, and hints and tips for what they should be doing as leaders. In the chapters that follow, I proffer a radically different approach to leadership/management development: a way of working that encourages participants to (i) take their experience seriously, (ii) notice, think about, and challenge dominant ways of thinking, and (iii) exercise practical judgement, that is, their ability to improvise in the moment and to work with rules of thumb rather than recipes; something that leader-managers seemingly used to value.

Notes

1 Yehouda Shenhav's book is entitled *Manufacturing Rationality: The Engineering Foundations of the Managerial Revolution* (1999). In it, he explores the rise of managers and management, and more particularly the colonisation of management thinking, management education, and organisational processes by engineers and engineering principles. It is a compelling read, brought to life by his deep dive into articles published in US engineering journals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
2 Managerialism is based on the belief that all aspects of organisational life can and should be controlled according to rational plans, procedures, structures, and systems of monitoring, designed to achieve the objectives set by a CEO, or equivalent, and/or a small group of executive leaders who, it is deemed, bring something special to the table that 'ordinary' managers can't.
3 Khurana was Associate Professor in Organizational Behaviour in 2007.

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2

RETHINKING LEADERSHIP

Doubt and disillusionment

In this chapter, I make good on my promise to share with you the sense that I am currently making of leadership and the implications that this has for my own practice in relation to leadership development. I say currently because my praxis has shifted dramatically in recent years, and it will no doubt develop further in the years to come. This is neither a sign of indecisiveness, on my part, nor lack of conviction; it's an acknowledgement that my current way of thinking is no more than that, a way of thinking – a good enough truth for me, for now. My sense-making of leading and leadership is an emerging amalgamation of my lived experience, augmented by ongoing, reflexive research into my day-to-day practice. The anxiety-provoking and identity-threatening struggle that accompanied this seismic shift in thinking/practice was catalysed by a niggling sense of doubt and disillusionment with conventional perspectives on leadership and organisation and the instrumental tools and techniques that I was working with in my role as a developer of managers/leaders and organisations (Flinn, 2011).

Over recent years, doubt and disillusionment have been creeping into mainstream academic and popular management literature. Authors like Barbara Kellerman (2012, 2018) and Jeffrey Pfeffer (2015) vent their disillusionment with leaders and leadership and express doubts as to the usefulness of conventional leadership education – a position, they readily admit, that they and their contemporaries in the 'leadership industry' played no small part in co-creating. In her book, *The End of Leadership*, Kellerman, Professor of Public Leadership at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, declares that leaders and leadership development are in disrepute. She goes on to explain why, after over 30 years spent working in 'various

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leadership centres, institutes, and associations', she was compelled to write a book that 'bites the hand' that feeds her:

> The reason is that I am uneasy, increasingly so, about leadership in the twenty-first century and the gap between the teaching of leadership and the practice of leadership … [is that] notwithstanding the enormous sums of money and time that have been poured into trying to teach people how to lead, over its roughly forty-year history the leadership industry has not in any major, meaningful, measurable way improved the human condition.
>
> *Kellerman (2012: 1–2)*

In his book, *Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time*, Pfeffer, Professor of Organization Behaviour at Stanford University, builds on Kellerman (2012) and goes one step further to share the following insight:

> It is not just that all efforts to develop better leaders, decades of such effort notwithstanding, have failed to make things appreciably better. I realized that much of what was and is going on, although sometimes inadvertently and unintentionally, makes things much worse.
>
> *Pfeffer (2015: 5)*

The doubt and disillusionment that Collins and Hansen (2011), Kellerman (2012), and Pfeffer (2015) express is provoked by what they see as the abject failure of leadership and the leadership industry, characterised by the many business failures (Collins and Hansen) and scandals (Kellerman and Pfeffer) that emerged during the first decades of the twenty-first century. Doubt stimulates, in all four authors, a desire to rethink leadership and leadership development. They each challenge what Kellerman describes as the variance between 'teaching' and 'practice' (2012: 1) and champion the need to find a radically different approach to leadership and leadership education. However, the thinking reflected in Collins', Kellerman's, and Pfeffer's recent publications is anything but radical.

For example, in *Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos and Luck – Why Some Thrive despite Them All* (Collins and Hansen, 2011), a book about how to 'thrive in [uncertainty and] chaos' (ibid.: 1), Collins and Hansen make no reference to either chaos theory or the complexity sciences (the sciences of uncertainty). Instead, they employ Collins' usual research method of identifying companies that he feels exhibit the characteristics he is looking for – in this case, 'spectacular performance' in 'unstable environments' that have beaten their 'industry index by at least 10 times' (the '10Xers') – with a view to identifying traits that are generalisable and transferable to other companies/settings. This results not only in a 'new' recipe (albeit, with an acknowledgement that its employment will not

guarantee success) but also in the following defence of the prescriptions offered in Collins' previous books:

> As we conducted our 10X research, we simultaneously tested the concepts from the previous work, considering whether any of the key concepts from those works ceased to apply in highly uncertain and chaotic environments. The earlier concepts held up, and we are confident that the concepts from all four studies increase the odds of building a great company.
>
> *Collins and Hansen (2011: 182)*

Collins' latest book, 'co-authored' with Bill Lazier (Collins, 2020), is an updated version of *Beyond Entrepreneurship: Turning Your Business into an Enduring Great Company*, written and published by Collins and Lazier in 1992 (Collins and Lazier, 1992). In the new edition, *Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0*, Collins identifies the seven elements of leadership style that he argues are 'common amongst effective leaders':

1 Authenticity
2 Decisiveness
3 Focus
4 Personal touch
5 Hard/soft people skills
6 Communication
7 Ever forward [mentality]

Collins and Lazier (2020: 45)

In *The End of Leadership*, Kellerman traces the history of how we have come to think about leading and leadership and challenges the individualistic conceptions of leadership that continue to dominate mainstream discourse:

> Leading in America has never been easy. But it is now more difficult than ever – not only because we have too many *bad leaders,* but because we have too many *bad followers* … many of us are too timid, too alienated, and/or, too disorganized to speak up and speak out, making it easy for corporate leaders to do what they *want* – to do what's best for them and their bank accounts. Whatever it is that ails us, in other words, is not only about those at the top falling down on the job, but also about those in the middle and at the bottom falling down on theirs.
>
> *2012: 124; emphasis in the original*

She calls for more democratic forms of leadership, where 'learning about followership and learning how to follow' are as important as 'learning to lead and manage' and advocate for the development of 'contextual intelligence' over-generalised,

one-size-fits-all prescriptions (ibid.: 94). In *Hard Times: Leadership in America* (Kellerman, 2014), Kellerman has 'come to see leadership as a *system* consisting of three moving parts … *Leader*... *Follower*... and *Context*' (ibid.: 1, emphasis in original). In her 2018 book, *Professionalizing Leadership*, Kellerman builds on this systemic reading of leadership and leadership development, to argue that leadership has become an 'occupation' when it should not only be a 'vocation' but also a 'profession' (Kellerman, 2018: 6). She advocates a return to the professionalisation project, first instigated by the first US business schools in the 1880s and abandoned in the 1980s (Khurana, 2007 – see Chapter 1), arguing that this time, in order to succeed, leadership education should be based on the pedagogy developed by the American military, 'an American institution [in Kellerman's opinion] that gets it right in the here and now' (ibid.: 2018: 8).

Pfeffer starts out by treading similar territory to Kellerman, berating CEOs who 'took their companies over a cliff' only to leave with 'enormous severance packages' (2015: 20), before coming to a very different conclusion. Rather than pinning his hopes on the emergence of more democratic forms of leadership, and inciting followers to stop colluding with their unscrupulous superiors, as Kellerman does, Pfeffer advises his readers to take care of themselves and be guided by self-interest:

> Furthermore, the pursuit of individual self-interest might be … good not just for you but also generally beneficial for the social systems including the work organizations in which you live.
>
> *Ibid.: 6*

Pfeffer's latest book is entitled *7 Rules of Power: Surprising-but True-Advice on How to Get Things Done and Advance Your Career* (Pfeffer, 2022). In the 'preface' to the book, Pfeffer lets the reader know that he is all too aware that his 'ideas about power don't fit the zeitgeist with its emphasis on collaboration, being nice, and enacting politically correct behavior' (ibid.: 11). However, he goes on to say that the emails he receives from past students, reporting the successes they have achieved as a result of employing the lessons learned in his *Paths to Power* class at Stanford, have helped convince him that being 'modest, authentic and truthful' and performing well is not enough (ibid.: 11).

Pfeffer's seventh rule of power is:

> 7. Success excuses almost everything you may have done to acquire power.
>
> *Ibid.: 13*

And he immediately follows with, 'I believe the seventh rule to be one of the more important, as it can cause people to act rather than worry needlessly about consequences' (ibid.: 13). My sense-making of Pfeffer's thinking is that he sees self-interest as the pragmatic (only workable) path to power and working for the collective 'good' as an idealistic (impractical) road to nowhere.

As outlined in the introduction, one could be forgiven for thinking that the initial responses of these three authors to what they describe as a crisis of leadership might herald the genesis of some new, progressive thinking in relation to leadership and leadership development, but as their most recent publications illustrate, their ideas are more back to the future than the shape of things to come. Collins huffs and puffs, only to find himself (literally) republishing the same individualistic view of leadership and recipes for success that he was proffering in 1992. Kellerman acknowledges the importance of the relation and context, only to find herself calling for a reinstatement of the professionalisation project that Khurana in 2007 deemed to have been dead and buried by the end of the 1980s. And Pfeffer (leaving aside for the moment his take on power relations, which I will return to in Chapter 3) finds himself doubling-down on self-interest to say if you can't beat them, join them, qualifying this way of thinking with Rule 7 – the end justifies the means (Pfeffer, 2022: 13).

In my experience, conventional leadership development programmes take one of three stances. Some pay little or no attention to the shadow side of organisational life and categorise leadership as a neutral activity for the common good (I argue that this is what Collins does). Others acknowledge the shadow side and then look to regulate its excesses by calling for the introduction of a professional code of conduct (I argue that this reflects Kellerman's current stance). And a minority embrace the shadow side, categorise self-interest as a form of cunning intelligence, the practical choice of the pragmatist, and offer advice on how to play in the shadows (I argue that this is where Pfeffer stands). I highlight Collins, Kellerman, and Pfeffer as they are representative of conventional thinking/practice in relation to leadership and leadership development: Collins for popular management literature, Kellerman for texts with more academic rigour/credibility, and Pfeffer as someone who straddles both genres. Having expressed disillusionment with conventional approaches to leadership and leadership development, they struggle to live with the uncertainty that this provokes each replacing doubt with yet another recipe for success. Brinkmann argues that 'certainty is necessarily dogmatic, whereas doubt … leads to openness, to other ways of acting and new understandings of the world' (Brinkmann, 2017: 53).

My doubt of and disillusionment with mainstream conceptions of leadership, leadership development, and stepwise recipes for success stemmed from the incongruity with my lived experience. In my search for more reality-congruent understandings of life in organisations, I was fortunate enough to come across alternative ways of thinking about and engaging with the world – perspectives I share here, as a *complexity approach* to leadership development. Reflexive curiosity involves scrutinising one's current thinking and comparing it with the thinking of others working from different perspectives and disciplines. In the remainder of this chapter, I share these different perspectives, thinking from disciplines that get little exposure in conventional discourse, namely, critical management studies and complexity perspectives that offer more modest, realistic understandings of leading

and organising. They have enabled me to make a better sense of my experience and they may do the same for you.

One of the most helpful and most challenging implications of taking complexity seriously is the realisation that organisation is merely the descriptive term we use to describe the global patterning that emerges in the patterning of many local interactions between human beings, and that phenomena like leadership also emerge in these local/global patterns of interaction. If one accepts this, then attempting to separate leadership or organisation from the patterns of interaction in which they emerge does not make sense. Thus, the splitting of leadership and organisation, below, is merely a literary device, a conceit to aid comprehension. It is also worth reiterating at this point that I remain in search mode (Smith, 2001). I invite you to reflect upon, question, and make sense of your own way of thinking as I do the same with mine.

Rethinking leadership

Before exploring my current understanding of leadership, an understanding that draws on the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (i.e., the complexity approach of the book's title), I need to share a little of this thinking with you. To do this, let's look at an event that will be familiar to most of you: Dr Martin Luther King Jr's famous 'I have a dream' speech. If you have heard the speech, take a few minutes to reflect upon the following questions relating to it. How long did it last? What was the context in which it was made? How would you describe King's delivery, and what, if anything, does this tell us about Martin Luther King Jr (MLK) as a leader? If you haven't heard the speech, and you have the opportunity (and the technology available) to watch it now, then it is readily available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=I47Y6VHc3Ms).

The speech was delivered at the end of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, attended by some 250,000 people in August 1963. It was made on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the culmination of a series of post-march activities that included musical sets from Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, and speeches by each of the leaders of the other Civil Rights groups in attendance. King's speech was just over 16 minutes long and the 'I have a dream' section comes about two-thirds of the way in. From a mainstream perspective, one that views (leadership and) management as a natural science, a science of certainty, King's speech might be described as the predictable act of a charismatic and heroic individual who had a personal vision of the future and used his skilled oratory to galvanise a group of followers to 'buy into' his dream. From this perspective, it was a predictable, planned, linear procedure that was systematically executed to perfection. Here leadership is viewed as an individualistic endeavour, with King transmitting his message to the expectant crowd who, in turn, enthusiastically receive, acknowledge, and accept it.

However, if we take another view of this episode …

In his account of the speech, *Behind the Dream: The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation*, a member of Martin Luther King Jr's legal team, Clarence B. Jones, claims that the 'I have a dream' section of the speech was improvised on the spur of the moment, prompted in part by King's friend, the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson (Jones and Connelly, 2012). Jones reports that up until the point where King launches into his 'I have a dream' refrain, some 11 minutes into the speech, he had stuck to his script. Jones and Connelly reflect:

> Martin … paused … this alone was nothing unusual. The hesitations and breaks were all part of his oratory process, the rhythms he mastered at the pulpit. Yet in that split second of silence, something historic and unexpected happened. Into that breach, Mahalia Jackson shouted to him from the speakers and organisers stand. She called out, "Tell 'em about the 'Dream', Martin, tell 'em about the 'Dream'!" Not many people heard her. But I did. And so did Martin … Observing this from my perch, I knew he'd just put himself into Mahalia's hands, given himself over to the spirit of the moment. That is something a speaker simply cannot know typing away in the quiet hotel suite. It has to be felt, right there at the lectern. But by then of course, for most orators, it's too late. Not for Martin Luther King Jr., though.
>
> *Ibid.: 107–108*

From the perspective of complex responsive processes or relating, drawing on the complexity sciences – the sciences of uncertainty – King's speech might be described as the simultaneously predictable and unpredictable patterning of the interdependent actions of many people, whereby all are influencing while simultaneously being influenced. The speech is predictable in that it was written down, typed, and annotated in advance of the day, and unpredictable in that the most famous passage was not planned but improvised on the spur of the moment, and although spontaneous, this wasn't the first time that King had shared 'his' dream. From a complexity perspective, meaning is not the pre-planned, predictable linear process described by sender-receiver models of communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1949), rather it is co-created in non-linear, iterative patterns of gesture and response (Mead, 1934), whereby the gesture and response cannot be separated from each other, or indeed from the history of gestures and responses that preceded them (Mead's understanding of communication is explored more fully in Chapter 5).

In the complexity approach that I am taking, leadership is understood to be a social and relational phenomenon not located within an individual but within the interdependent interplay of many people's intentions/actions. King is simultaneously influencing, whilst being influenced by, the crowd. And how 'his' gesture plays out will depend on how it is taken up in local interaction (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). That is, people will make sense of what King is saying in the simultaneous interplay of their own private dialogue and the dialogue(s) that they engage in with

the small number of people with whom they will interact at and after the event. These conversations will be influenced by all the other conversations that those involved engage in, again, in local interaction, which will also reflect all the other multitudinous responses that they encounter in newspapers and on the TV, radio, etc. in the weeks, months, years ahead. And, of course, one's response might also be influenced by whether one had experienced and/or witnessed discrimination first hand.

Drawing on the perspective of complex responsive processes, I am arguing that the leadership capacities that King exhibits are (i) sense-making, the capacity for recognising the patterns of interaction that groups of interdependent people are caught up in and articulating an understanding (and/or next step) that resonates with others and brings them into communion; (ii) reflexivity, the capacity to become more detached in one's involvement, to notice what is currently happening (the patterns of thinking/doing that are emerging and how you are influencing and being influenced by them) with a view to questioning whether this is useful to you and those around you; and (iii) practical judgement, the capacity to decide what is needed in the moment, and if one realises that something novel is needed, to have the courage to change tack. And these capacities are not separate; they are interdependent, which I why I refer to the exercise of them as a process of reflexive curiosity. It would be impossible to say where one started and the others ended. Leadership emerges, or doesn't, in this process of mutual recognition. In this case, in recognising themselves in what King is saying, an element of the crowd simultaneously recognises King as a leader.

This is my current understanding of leadership, and it is a great deal to take in, particularly if one has only ever been exposed to mainstream conceptions of leading and leadership. In Chapter 3, along with the more comprehensive introduction to the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, I will provide a more expansive explication of sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement, but for now, I want to model the reflexive curiosity that I am advocating by revisiting the question that researchers, teachers, students, and participant-leader-managers on leadership development programmes continue to grapple with: leadership/management – same or different?

Leadership/management – Same Or different?

My usual response to this question is that leadership and management are one and the same – intertwined (Flinn, 2011; Flinn and Mowles, 2014). In part, they have been artfully separated in the dominant discourse to legitimise the large salary differentials that executives enjoy (see Chapter 1). However, the tenacity of the classic notion that leaders are somehow different from managers (Kotter, 2008), the pocket of mainstream soul searching (Kellerman, 2012; Pfeffer, 2015) that has accompanied the many business failures and scandals that have surfaced since the works of Shenhav (1999) and Khurana (2007) were first published, the

establishment of a distinct branch of Critical Management Studies (CMS) called Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) (Crawford *et al*., 1997), and the recent emergence of several practice-based perspectives of management/leadership – a practice theory of management (Tengblad, 2012) and Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) (Raelin, 2016) – prompt me to take a fresh look at this question/debate.

I approach this question/debate from three angles. First, under the heading 'Can one be a leader without followers?' I explore leadership and leading as a social rather than an individualistic phenomenon, a view that takes account of 'followers' or, how I would more accurately describe them, other people. Second, I consider what it is that leaders actually find themselves doing when leading in organisational settings. And finally, I explore leadership as something that is co-created and dynamic rather than fixed, something that is discovered in practice and not to be confused with abstract models, theories, and accounts that one finds in mainstream textbooks, popular management literature, and business (auto)biographies.

Can one be a leader without followers?

In mainstream and popular leadership literature, lots of space is given to exploring leaders and leadership, but very little to the exploration of followers/followership (Kellerman, 2012; Blom and Alvesson, 2015). Similarly, in the business schools and corporate training rooms that I work in, consideration of *others* by programme participants invariably revolves around questions such as 'How do I get X to do Y?', 'How do I get my team/department/organisation to "buy in" to the new working practice/structure/strategy?', 'What can I do to bring about a change of culture in this place?', 'What can I do to overcome resistance to change?', etc. When I attend such programmes as a participating leader-manager, there is very little, if any, questioning of whether what is being requested of X is reasonable, or whether the new working practice/structure/strategy or the change of culture is necessary, sensible, or realistic. Getting people to 'buy in' (i.e., getting the other party or parties to see things your way) is often (mis)understood as a form of consultation, rather than being more accurately described as a form of coercive persuasion (Schein, 1961). In these conventional development programmes, whatever course of action the leader-manager decides to take is obviously the right course of action, and following the taking of said action, any subsequent variance between intention and outcome is rationalised away – 'X didn't do Y'; 'There wasn't "buy in"'.[1]

I chose the Martin Luther King Jr speech to highlight the differences between mainstream thought and the complexity approach that I find more reality congruent, because all too often when participants on leadership development programmes are invited to discuss leadership and leaders who they admire, they pick out figures such as King and Nelson Mandela. I find comparisons between what Mandela might have found himself doing, and what we as leader-managers in organisations find ourselves doing, problematic for many reasons, but for the moment I want to concentrate on the one aspect of this type of comparison that provokes the most

dissonance for me. The difference most often overlooked in such discussions is that there is a high degree of voluntarism in the recognition of King and Mandela as leaders, whereas generally, as leader-managers, we are not chosen, not by our teams at any rate. We are appointed, usually by senior managers in the organisational hierarchy. Employees don't usually get to choose their leader-managers. This raises the question: is it useful to think of managers as leaders when employees have limited choice as to whether to follow or not? Of course, the answer to this question depends on one's working definition of leadership. For those mainstream thinkers who see management and leadership as separate roles (Zaleznik, 1977; Kotter, 2008), leaders set direction, align people, and provide motivation. This characterisation of leadership involves what Alvesson *et al*. describe as 'efforts to influence others within an asymmetrical relation, mainly through meanings, cognitions, and ideas, not through administration or instructions for specific behaviours', which the authors define as management (2016: 3). For Blom and Alvesson, leadership differs from formal authority (management) as it leaves potential followers with a choice:

> Formal hierarchy may lead to compliance, and senior positions and leadership tend to overlap, but … leadership captures something different from formal positions and interactions. You may accept and comply with the manager's formal mandate, but when it comes to management of meaning (values, ideas, beliefs, understandings) subordinates can more or less choose if they take a follower position or not.
>
> *Blom and Alvesson (2015: 270)*

Furthermore, they argue that the invitation to take up a 'follower position' is not so much politely declined, as actively resisted (ibid.). They problematise mainstream texts on leadership that proceed from the assumption that employees 'need or desire followership', to argue that employees are much more likely to 'avoid and minimize leadership/followership relations in a bid to protect their autonomy and identity' (ibid.: 267). They argue that there are potential 'upsides' of following, which they note as 'inclusion, support, direction, meaning [and the] reduction of uncertainty and anxiety' (ibid.). However, they also discovered that even where these upsides were present, people still resisted the 'downsides', that is, the negative impact of leadership on their identity and autonomy, irrespective of whether the leader was deemed to be competent or not (ibid.).

Blom and Alvesson suggest that the talking up of the importance of leadership, which now characterises much of the dominant discourse, may well paradoxically have hastened the demise of followership, whereby 'the reinforcement of ambitions and fantasies of aspiring leaders may lead to a shortage of aspiring followers' (2015: 279). They contend that any thoughts of replacing management with leadership, the task that I was commissioned to undertake by my manager when I joined the University of Hertfordshire (Flinn, 2011), can only be achieved rhetorically as

most organisational settings 'still involve significant subordination to management, including allocation of work tasks, requests to comply with corporate bureaucracy, implementing corporate strategies and fulfilling specific objectives and evaluating work performances' (Blom and Alvesson, 2015: 275). They accept that hierarchy, management, and leadership are all necessary parts of organisational life, but they conclude that the significance of leadership in organisations might be diminishing because when 'people see themselves more as 'non-followers' (e.g., professionals, peers, co-workers) … there will be "less leadership"'(ibid.: 277).

What resonates with me about Blom and Alvesson's research is that the people in their study, rather than crying out for leadership, sought to avoid and minimise it, not only as a constraint on their freedom but also as a challenge to their sense of self. In my professional and personal experience, for all the mainstream discourse about the importance of purpose, vision, mission, values, and culture, most people just get on with their day-to-day work paying little, if any, attention to such distractions (Flinn, 2011). We tend to accomplish whatever it is that we accomplish in the workplace through working with the small group(s) of people with whom we interact daily, in what can be described as local interaction(s) (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). In my experience, the artefacts that senior managers produce, which are incidentally also developed in local interaction(s) with small groups of people – strategy documents, Key Performance Indicators, visions/missions, and values – have very little direct influence on the day-to-day activities of the majority of employees, or indeed on the day-to-day activities of the senior managers who produced them in the first place.

Blom and Alvesson's finding that most employees neither 'expect their manager (or senior colleague) to define the right values, beliefs, and meanings for them' nor to provide 'support and development' (2015: 268) has particular relevance to the sector in which I currently spend most of my time, the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. In HE, comparing the task of managing academics to 'herding cats' has become a cliché, as has the notion that academic members of staff have little affiliation to the institutions that pay their salaries. Academic fealty, it is argued, is paid to the school, the discipline, or a smaller subset thereof. Richard Bolden *et al*.'s (2012) study of UK HE institutions suggests that academic staff not only avoid the identity and autonomy constraints, the 'downsides' of leadership that Blom and Alvesson (2015) identify, but they also look elsewhere for the 'upsides' of inclusion, support, direction, and meaning.

The academic staff that Bolden *et al*. surveyed reported that they looked to 'colleagues', 'former colleagues', and their 'PhD supervisors' for this support rather than formal leaders in their institutions (2012: 18). Here 'formal' denotes those in positions of authority. That is, leaders who have been appointed, usually by other leaders, to take up a position in the organisational hierarchy in which they have line-management responsibility for (authority over) others. This would also include those people who may not have formal line-management responsibility/authority but who have been placed in a position that provides them with a degree

of disciplinary power by proxy. Informal denotes those leaders who have no formal position of authority, but who are able to articulate or exhibit a way of thinking/working/being that others follow; in complexity terms, there is a shift in the patterning of interactions whereby people recognise themselves in what one of the group is saying/doing, and in recognising themselves they recognise what the other is doing as (an act of) leader(ship).

In my experience, informal leaders, like the ones identified in Bolden *et al.*'s study, often gain influence precisely because they are not part of the establishment. And this highlights another aspect of leadership and organisation that often goes unexplored, or at least underexplored, in the mainstream and that is the dynamics of power and how they play out in patterns of inclusion and exclusion[2] (Elias, 1939). I will explore in more detail the complexity perspective on power in Chapter 5, but for now it is enough to say that the power chances of the 'established' (those in positions of authority) are usually more resilient than those of the 'outsiders' (Elias and Scotson, 1994), that is, the informal leaders (those without any formal position of authority). Consequently, if one adopts the distinction that Alvesson and Jonsson make between leading and managing, then the unqualified use of the term 'leader' for those in positions of authority is not useful as the majority of actions taken by those in formal positions in the organisational hierarchy are concerned with 'administration or instructions for specific behaviours' (managing), rather than 'efforts to influence others … through meanings, cognitions, and ideas' (leading) (201: 3). This distinction problematises mainstream definitions of leadership which mistakenly label all gestures of the powerful as (acts of) leadership.

I still find the splitting of (acts of) leadership and (acts of) management problematic, but I am going to ignore this for now, as differentiating between 'acts of leadership' and 'acts of management' facilitates the articulation of something from my experience of working with MBA students over the last six years. One of the activities that we task students with each year is to work in groups to undertake a project in the community. For the students, experienced middle and senior managers who are studying part-time for their MBAs while working, this often involves engaging with local charities. The pressures of work, family life, and overlapping deadlines for MBA assignments mean that the task of contacting and arranging something with a charity/community group often falls to the group member who has the available time and/or inclination. Following the event, the students reflect on the project and identify what, if anything, is generalisable from their experience to their day-to-day practice. In these reflections, students often characterise the person who made the initial contact with the charity/community project as the group leader. During debriefs I or one of my teaching team colleagues invariably find ourselves asking whether the activities that this person undertook are best described as acts of leadership or acts of coordination.

So far, in answer to the question 'Can one be a leader without followers?' I am arguing that (i) mainstream conceptions of what constitutes leading and leadership

take little account of followership, and doing so problematises simplistic definitions that categorise those in positions of authority as leaders; (ii) leading and leadership are not the exclusive preserve of those in positions of authority; and (iii) not all (many) of the commonplace, regular activities of those in authority should be classed as (acts of) leadership. This leads to the second theme of the 'What's the difference between leadership and management?' debate, and that is, as managers in organisations, what is it that we actually find ourselves doing on a daily basis, and how does this compare with mainstream and popular management conceptions of what leaders should or ought to be doing?

What do leaders find themselves doing when leading in organisational settings?

One of the most significant changes to my practice as a result of taking a complexity approach to leadership development is to encourage the managers with whom I work to take our day-to-day experience seriously. This means making sense of what is actually happening in our quotidian interactions with a view to questioning whether what we are doing together is useful to us and to those around us. My modus operandi as a leadership developer, prior to embarking on the DMan, found me sharing an idealised view of what constituted effective leadership (the organisation's competency framework, the latest leadership theory/framework, etc.), inviting participants to measure themselves against this with a view to identifying the gap between current practice and the idealised view, and then supporting them with the development of an action plan to close the 'gap'. This is a reductive description of my former practice, and I am not suggesting that there was no merit whatsoever in what I was doing. Indeed, as a young manager, I attended such programmes, and I do not recall dismissing them out of hand. However, what I do recall is the anxiety provoked by not being able to replicate the espoused theories in practice, which leaves me questioning how useful my former conventional approach to leadership development was for participants in supporting their day-to-day activities as leader-managers.

I mention this because my former normative approach to leadership development is still very much in evidence across the leadership industry. Indeed, Pfeffer contends that:

> The leadership industry is so obsessively focused on the normative – what leaders should do and how things ought to be – that it has largely ignored asking the fundamental question of what is actually true and going on and why. Unless and until leaders are measured for what they really do and for actual workplace conditions, and until these leaders are held accountable for improving both their own behaviour and, as a consequence, workplace outcomes, nothing will change.
>
> *2015: 23*

As argued above, if Pfeffer had looked further than mainstream leadership discourse, he may well have engaged with some of the thinking from CMS scholars. CMS is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of disciplines and researchers, who were challenging mainstream conceptions of leadership, leadership development, and organisation long before CMS came to be recognised as a distinct school of thought in the 1990s (Willmott, 1992). As outlined in the Introduction, after decades of working at the margins, ideas from CMS are finding their way onto leadership development programmes, as developers and participants acknowledge the shadow side of organisational life that is underexplored in mainstream textbooks and popular management literature.[3] CMS scholars have a long history of challenging the normative.

Mats Alvesson, independently and in collaboration with various colleagues, has for many years been researching whether the leadership claims of managers in organisations are supported by what they actually find themselves doing in practice (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b; Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson and Karreman, 2016). Some of his more recent research finds him revisiting this territory, but rather than simply comparing how managers account for what they are doing with what happens in practice, Alvesson and Jonsson explore the influence that the current leadership discourse (contained in 'books … courses and other educational settings'), along with organizational expectations (policies, values, ambition), and one's own 'personality and self-image' (2016: 15) might be having on what it is that managers do.

To do this they follow Kim, a middle manager in a large, international manufacturing organisation, as she carries out her day-to-day responsibilities. Although Kim describes her leadership style as participative with a strong emphasis on coaching, Alvesson *et al*. discover little evidence of this. Instead, they find Kim dealing with issues based on 'spontaneous readings of the situation, without much sign of careful reflection or an integrated, coherent idea or framework guiding an overall leadership ambition' (2016: 14). This view of leading/managing as an improvisatory activity echoes my own research findings (Flinn, 2011), as does their experience of finding 'very little leadership in any distinct meaning (where the followers are transformed or managed in terms of meaning, or where some other systematic influence agenda is expressed) … the actions are more administrative or operational' (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2016: 14). As outlined above, for all the talk of leadership, the managers with whom I work on leadership development programmes are more concerned with performance management, workload, and budgeting issues than they are with visions, values, or strategic plans, irrespective of seniority. Indeed, following exposure to abstract theories of leadership that prescribe what they ought to be doing as leaders, managers frequently second-guess their own practices and try to match their experience to the models (see Chapter 3). One of the cornerstones of the complexity approach to leadership development is helping participants to avoid getting caught up in idealised and reductive prescriptions that bear little resemblance to the complex reality of their working lives

(Flinn and Mowles, 2014). This is also something that Alvesson and Jonsson hope that their study will contribute to:

> Thus, in practical terms, our study contributes toward helping managers, in particular middle managers, whose task or ideal is to "lead" others, by raising awareness of the conflicting ideas and problems, and so liberate them from the ideals and role models that look fine in management books but that few may be able to live up to. Much leadership talk about patterns, ideals, styles, clear ideas, and coherence may prevent managers and others from clear insights of managerial practice and put unnecessary burdens on managers to produce leadership as prescribed.
>
> *Alvesson and Jonsson (2016: 16)*

They call for 'more in-depth studies of individual cases where questions such as the possible (in)consistency in behavior and the possible influence are studied in practice', arguing that 'there is a shortage of ambitious case studies of typical managers, in which context, content, and behavior are taken seriously' (ibid.: 2–3). My initial response on reading this statement was 'Well it depends where you look!' For many years, Tony Watson (2001) has researched how 'people in managerial work shape their personal identities and their working lives – at the same time as being shaped by the world around them' (Watson and Harris, 1999: vii). Meanwhile, Stefan Tengblad and Ola Edvin Vie provide a useful overview of the many 'classic, mature and recent' studies of 'management in practice' that have been carried out over the last 60 years across North America, the UK, Scandinavia, Germany, and the Netherlands (Tengblad, 2012).

Tengblad also calls for more reality-congruent research into leadership and organisation:

> There is an urgent need to establish a strong research tradition based on the realities of managerial work – for example, the realities of information and work overload, complexity, uncertainty, performance pressure, surprises, unintended consequences, and irreconcilable expectations, to say nothing of the emotional demands of work.
>
> *Tengblad (2012: 7)*

He and his colleagues are working 'towards a practice theory of management' in which the focus of attention is on 'how management is performed in everyday work practices by countless numbers of managers all over the world' (ibid.: 5), in contrast to mainstream concepts of how it ought to be done. For Tengblad, this 'shifts the attention from formal management techniques to rules-of-thumb and behavioural patterns' (ibid.).

Joseph Raelin (2016) has edited a volume of research entitled *Leadership-as-Practice*. Raelin describes this as 'a new movement in leadership research and

practice destined to shake the foundations of the very meaning of leadership in the worlds of both theory and application' (ibid.: 1). This new movement conceives of 'leadership as occurring as a practice rather than residing in the traits or behaviours of particular individuals', that is, 'leadership as a social, material, and jointly accomplished process' (ibid.: 3). Raelin contends that L-A-P 'resonates with several closely related traditions such as collective, shared, distributed, and relational leadership' but argues that, unlike these perspectives, L-A-P does not characterise leadership as a 'role driven, entitative influence relationship' (ibid.: 4), that is, L-A-P researchers understand leadership as a complex phenomenon that goes beyond leader/follower relations.

Both perspectives, a practice theory of management (Tengblad, 2012) and L-A-P (Raelin, 2016), resonate with the complexity approach to leadership and leadership development that I am advocating here. My approach is informed by the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating that I first encountered during my doctoral studies at University of Hertfordshire (UH). For over 25 years, the complexity research group at UH has been encouraging leaders, as practitioner-researchers, to take what they do in their ordinary, everyday interactions seriously. On the DMan, managers are encouraged to put 'people and what they are doing at work at the heart of their enquiry: how they talk to one another, how they are bound up in relationships of power, how they make judgements which express ideology' (Mowles, 2015). The narratives that I share in this book, as well as vignettes from DMan colleagues, give a flavour of this, and I would argue that they are made all the more powerful as these are not third-party observations, but first-hand accounts of practice that have been iteratively deepened through engagement with and challenge by doctoral supervisors and learning community colleagues during the three-year course of study.

I agree with Alvesson and Jonsson (2016) that narratives of leadership are often not substantiated in/by practice, and I also concur with Blom and Alvesson's (2015) observation that sometimes leadership is not only unnecessary but also avidly resisted. However, I would also argue that some accounts of leadership/management *are* a fair representation of practice (see the vignettes contained in this book and the accounts documented in the work of Tengblad (2012) and Raelin (2016)), and Blom and Alvesson's observations represent only one side of the coin. In other words, although I agree that the talking up of leadership might have contributed unexpectedly to a decline in the number of people who are willing to follow (Blom and Alvesson, 2015), I also contend that it has led simultaneously to a demand from workers for managers to step into the space that Alvesson *et al*. refer to as leadership (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2016). Thus, as more and more managers refer to themselves as leaders, it should come as little surprise that workers retort with, 'OK, show us some leadership!'

Ever since the Hawthorne Studies[4] in the 1920s, and the subsequent rise of the human relations theory/movement, managers at all levels are expected to make 'efforts to influence others … through meanings, cognitions, and ideas'

(Alvesson and Jonsson, 2016: 3). And as much as we might resist leadership, there are times when we expect our line managers to make sense of the context in which we find ourselves and proffer next steps. For example, during (i) the introduction of new projects, initiatives or ways of working; (ii) times of uncertainty, and/or periods of major upheaval and change, we look (with hope or barely disguised *Schadenfreude*) to our leader-managers, the ones who are paid more than us, to provide us with direction, support, and motivation; and (iii) the interview process for a management role, could any candidate interview for the job and hope to be appointed without declaring the passion they have for leading, their vision for the future, and the changes they will make in order to maintain or return the team/department/organisation to the top of the ratings/rankings/stock market?

So far, in answer to the question 'What do we find ourselves doing when leading in organisational settings?' I argue that (i) mainstream conceptions of what we think managers are and/or ought to be doing are often not substantiated in practice, and although there are accounts and perspectives that offer a more reality-congruent understanding of praxis, they are given little space in orthodox literature; (ii) the talking up of leadership has paradoxically increased resistance and raised expectations at the same time; and (iii) if, for argument's sake, we define leadership as 'efforts to influence others within an asymmetrical relation, mainly through meanings, cognitions, and ideas, not through administration or instructions for specific behaviours', which Alvesson and Jonsson define as management (2016: 3), then I contend that every manager with whom I am currently working is expected to do both. Of course, how such gestures are taken up is not within the gift of the individual, and this points to the third and final theme arising from the Martin Luther King Jr narrative, which I want to consider here, and that is leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon, something that arises in interaction rather than being a reified 'it'.

Leadership as a phenomenon that is co-created in practice

I noted above that the practice theory of management (Tengblad, 2012) and L-A-P (Raelin, 2016) perspectives have a great deal of resonance with the complexity approach that I am offering and exploring in this book. For Sveningsson *et al*, the idea of leadership existing outside of the relationships in which it emerges and is sustained is ludicrous:

> The exercise of leadership in splendid isolation is meaningless. Leadership by definition exists between people, therefore, it is an expression of a mutual relationship … Leadership does not emanate a priori because someone in an organisation is assigned the leadership role.
>
> *Sveningsson et al. (2012: 79)*

Drawing on the work of Shamir (2007), Sveningsson *et al.* argue that all involved are:

> co-makers of the leadership relationships that evolve, [they] connect and define one another, mutually and relationally. Individuals become leaders when one or several people accept the importance of their directions/ideas and are influenced by them. The leader who is influenced by someone else's conceptions and interpretations is being led. The leader then becomes a follower.
>
> *Sveningsson et al. (2012: 79)*

For Raelin, L-A-P 'depicts immanent collective action emerging from mutual, discursive, sometimes recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment and over time among those engaged in practice' (2016: 3). For Raelin, 'leadership is not dependent on any one person to mobilise action on behalf of everybody else. The effort is intrinsically collective' (ibid.: 4). Echoing Sveningsson *et al.*'s (2012) view of leadership, Raelin argues that those who emerge as leaders (the 'meaning makers' in his terms) 'may be serving in managerial roles, but anyone within the team can be responsible provided they have astute awareness of the perspectives, reasoning patterns, and narratives of others' (2016: 4). For Raelin, this view challenges authors who focus on 'the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers', such as Kellerman (2012) in *The End of Leadership* (Raelin, 2016: 216).[5]

In *Reflexive Leadership: Organising in an Imperfect World*, Alvesson *et al.* acknowledge 'the social, relational and processual character of leadership' (2017: 8). For them, this 'involves both leaders and followers engaged in mutual interaction based on the influencing of meaning and understanding. It goes beyond a static attention to the individual leader and his/her ideas, convictions and personal psychology' (ibid.).

> This view of leadership is based on voluntary compliance. People position themselves as followers based not on legal requirements or out of fear of negative sanctions, but because leadership acts provide some meaningful as well as practical, emotionally and morally convincing direction. In this way leadership forms the basis for motivation since it provides some sensible idea or purpose in terms of performing specific work tasks.
>
> *Ibid.: 8–9*

They further argue that leadership is but one of a set of six practices that constitute how we get things done in organisational settings. They identify the other five 'alternatives and supplements to leadership' as:

- Management
- Exercise of (coercive) power
- Peer influencing (via networks)

- Group work
- Autonomy (self-management)

Ibid.: 17

However, they are also at pains to proffer the caveat that they 'of course recognise the many ambiguous cases where the six positions are mixed' (ibid.). They call for the adoption of 'reflexive leadership, which means that people – senior and junior – think carefully about how to organize work and how to use both leadership and other ways of organizing to make workplaces function well' (ibid.: 2–3).

So far, under the heading 'Leadership as a phenomenon that is co-created in practice', I argue that leadership is something that is co-created in interaction and is not only open to those who find themselves in formal positions of authority. This view resonates with the understanding of leadership that I shared in the Martin Luther King Jr narrative above. Drawing on the thinking of Stacey and Mowles (2016), I view leadership as a social and relational phenomenon that is neither confined to those in formal positions in the organisational hierarchy nor only available to extraordinary individuals in possession of special attributes that others do not have (as the dominant discourse would have us believe). A person is recognised as a leader when others recognise themselves in what that person is saying and/or doing, and in recognising themselves, they come to recognise that person as a leader. Leadership emerges in interaction. It is co-created in social processes of mutual recognition.

I agree with Alvesson *et al.*'s thesis that leading/leadership is only one of the phenomena that arise when human beings come together to get things done in organisational (and other) settings and that leadership is not only open to those in formal positions of authority. And the identification of the types of activity that supplement leadership may have helped my MBA students to account for what happened during their community project in a more nuanced way than categorising almost every act as an act of leadership (see above). However, the overarching inference that senior and junior workers might get to choose 'how to use both leadership and other ways of organising to make workplaces function well' (Alvesson *et al*., 2017: 2–3) does not make sense to me. The six practices that Alvesson *et al*. (2017) identify and Raelin's (2016) notions of collective, shared, distributed, and relational forms of leadership are useful as descriptors of some of the phenomena that emerge in the patterning of human interaction that we call organisation, but as concepts that can be instrumentally introduced, encouraged, and/or controlled at will, less so.

This brings us back to the argument that I made early on in this chapter: if one accepts that organisation is merely a term used to describe the global patterns of interaction that emerge in the interplay of many local patterns of interaction, and that phenomena such as leadership also emerge in these local/global patterns of interaction, then attempting to separate leadership from the patterns of interaction in which it emerges does not make sense. And I would argue that this is the main

difference between Alvesson *et al*.'s reflexive leadership, Raelin's L-A-P, Tengblad and colleagues' practice theory of management, and the complexity approach that I am offering here. These three perspectives seem[6] to be working from the premise that we can choose the form of pattern our interactions take and/or step in and out of them to manipulate them at will, whereas I argue that we cannot do so. We are forming while simultaneously being formed by the patterns of interaction we are caught up in, and we can influence but we cannot control. Moreover, the individuals involved in these local patterns of interaction will not necessarily agree with the descriptor that might be offered for the pattern they are involved in. One person's 'management' might be another's 'exercise of (coercive) power'. I will expand on this in the next chapter.

Leadership: Towards a working definition

Although revisiting my thinking and engaging with some recent developments in leadership research has not fundamentally shifted the sense that I am making of leadership, it has really helped me to clarify my thinking and I hope that it has given you a chance to reflect on yours. The first point of clarification concerns the form of leadership and thus leadership development that I am focusing on in this book. Most people who attend the leadership development programmes that I am involved in are line managers, that is, they occupy formal positions of authority in the organisational hierarchy.[7] Consequently, I am concentrating on leadership and leadership development as it pertains to line managers, that is, leader-managers in formal positions of authority. That is not to say that what follows will not be relevant and/or useful to those who find themselves having to lead (and/or support the development of those who lead) without or beyond authority, but I feel it is important to clarify the focus. Leader-managers are called upon to both cajole and coerce, and although one might anticipate that at this point in the twenty-first century this might privilege influence over insistence, both are necessary. The idea that leadership development can somehow be separated from management development does not make sense to me.

Second, drawing on Alvesson (2013), Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a, 2003b), Alvesson and Karreman (2016), Alvesson and Jonsson (2016), Blom and Alvesson (2015), Bolden *et al.* (2012), and Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff (1991), even though one might occupy a formal position of authority in the corporate hierarchy, this does not necessarily mean that one will come to be recognised as a leader. The constraints on autonomy and sense of self that come with being 'invited to follow', allied to the growing rhetoric that we are all leaders now, fuel follower resistance and might go some way to explaining why academic colleagues look to informal leaders as their first port of call for support rather than their line managers (Bolden *et al*., 2012). However, I also contend that the talking up of leadership cuts both ways, with team members expecting their line managers to play up to the archetypes outlined in Chapter 1 – manager (co-ordinator), leader (bringer of hope), and entrepreneur (maker of new worlds) (Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff, 1991).

Third, leadership is something that co-created in interaction. We do not get to choose what form leadership takes, as this emerges in the patterns of interaction that constitute organisation. Thus, any talk of introducing, unleashing, or encouraging collective, shared, distributed, and relational (Raelin, 2016) forms of leadership becomes problematic. Nor do we get to choose which form of organising we would like to 'use' in order to 'function well' (Alvesson *et al*., 2017). Similarly, if one accepts that leadership is a social and relational phenomenon, then one cannot choose to be a participative, collaborative, transformational, or authentic leader. As descriptors of patterns that one might notice in organisational settings, such categorisations might be useful, but as concepts that can be instrumentally fashioned, they are less so. Suggestions of this type confirm for me the difficulties that arise when one artificially tries to separate out a phenomenon like leadership from the patterns of interaction in which it emerges. This is something I will pick up in the next chapter where I will establish a working definition for organisation.

Leadership: A working definition

I see leadership as making sense of the social context in which one finds oneself and then articulating an understanding/next step in which people recognise themselves and in so doing come to recognise one as leader. And I see management as coping with the context and the intended and unintended consequences of working from the new understanding and/or taking that next step into the unknown. However, one cannot separate leadership and management, as it is in the process of coping that one makes sense of the context and comes to form the understanding and/or next step that is articulated and recognised as leading/leadership. They are two sides of the same coin.

Do I think I've nailed it? No! Any definition of leadership will be open to challenge and contestation. An emergent social phenomenon like leadership will always be difficult to pin down, but this does not mean that we should stop inquiring into it. Indeed, we should ensure that we never cease to reflect on the part we play in it, either as leaders or as active or passive followers, consumers, or victims. We should always be involved in the reflexive exploration of the question, 'Who are we, and what are we doing together?' And is what we are doing together useful (legal, ethical, moral, and sustainable) for us and for those around us (colleagues, co-workers, and the wider community)? What implications does this have for me as a leader of leadership development? Am I involved in leadership or management development? Both? Is leadership about enabling or constraining? Both, and at the same time (see Chapter 7). There is no model, framework, or recipe for leadership beyond developing reflexive curiosity – the capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement. In Part II, I explore the implications of this way of thinking for leadership development in practice. I draw on a selection of reflective narrative accounts, my own and those of fellow practitioners from Germany, the US, Denmark, and the UK, to explore what taking a complexity approach to a variety of established leadership development interventions looks like in practice.

Notes

1 When I find myself in these spaces, the thing that strikes me most is how little room is given for doubt and reflexive curiosity – the capacities that catalysed and facilitated the dramatic shift in my thinking and practice that began over a decade ago.
2 Informal leaders are often subsequently and/or consequently called upon to take up formal roles in the organisational hierarchy. The rationalisation for this course of action sometimes falls into the 'keep your enemies close' category but more usually occurs because informal leaders are articulating something that others recognise and are attracted to, including those making recruitment decisions. Of course, appointments to formal positions shift the power dynamic, which may in turn lead to the 'follower resistance' that Blom and Alvesson. (2015) talk of, as the previously 'informal' leader becomes part of the management establishment.
3 On the programmes that I am involved in, for instance, one might find Dennis Tourish exploring *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership* (2013), and/or Erik de Haan cautioning participants to guard against *The Leadership Shadow:* [that is] *How to Recognize and Avoid Derailment, Hubris and Overdrive* (de Haan and Kasozi, 2014).
4 The Hawthorne Studies were psychological experiments carried out to test the effect that small changes to the working environment (i.e., lighting) have on the productivity of factory workers.
5 Raelin refers to Kellerman because her article appears in the same edition of the journal that this article is published in (see Raelin, 2017).
6 I say 'seem to' as the L-A-P anthology contains a broad church of thinking and thinkers, as does the practice theory of management volume, and to a lesser extent (at least in terms of the number of contributors), Alvesson *et al.*'s (2017) book. I need to engage more closely with all three texts and look at some more of the individual contributors' most recent research publications. This is something that I look forward to.
7 And of the small number of leaders that do find their way onto the programmes that I lead, who are not in formal positions of authority, the vast majority express the wish that they were. For these colleagues, the perception is that it is easier to get things done 'through administration or instructions for specific behaviours' rather than through the negotiation of 'meanings, cognitions, and ideas' (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2016: 3).

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3

RETHINKING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

In search of certainty

It's Friday afternoon. Since 9.00 a.m. this morning, I have been working with a group of managers on a corporate leadership development programme called *Making Sense of Leading* (MSOL). The programme is a mix of one- and two-day, monthly workshops exploring leadership in an experiential and broadly critical way.[1] We are 8 days into the 12-day programme and today we are 'Making Sense of Leading … Change'. Seven of the usual 10 group members are present, and in addition, we have been joined for the day by Paul, a participant from an earlier cohort who missed this session when his group took part in it 6 months ago.

During the morning check in (Community Meeting), discussion revolved around the pressures of dealing with the 'usual chaos' that accompanies the start of a new academic year.[2] Students arrived on campus two weeks ago, and the challenges of inducting thousands of new and returning students figured in the reflections of all eight participants (three academic colleagues and five from professional services). The conversation turned to the introduction of the new timetabling system. The system was introduced last year, and it would be fair to say that the change did not go as smoothly as everybody might have liked. Indeed, the difficulties were such that the Vice Chancellor apologised publicly for the 'teething troubles'.

The group attributed the 'troubles' to 'poor change management' and identified three reasons why. Reason one, the university allotted nine months to implement a system that it had taken other institutions three years to introduce. Reason two, the 'off the shelf' system chosen could not accommodate the idiosyncratic variables (human and technical) that were previously managed manually by people (timetablers) talking to other people (teaching staff and students) and negotiating a way forward that made sense for the vast majority of all involved. And reason three,

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'senior management' had either misinterpreted the very vocal dissent of large numbers of staff as 'noise' that would abate once the system was up and running, or else they ignored the operational realities until it was too late. The consensus was that the system had not improved much in the last 12 months; we'd just become adept at finding the 'workarounds' needed to address its multiple inadequacies.

During the discussion, I intervened to problematise the oversimplistic game of 'If only they'd…' that several of the participants had gotten caught up in. I asked the group to consider how situations like this come about, particularly as several of the consequences of introducing the new system seemed to be both unintended and unwanted by everyone involved. I suggested that it is often difficult to discern the difference between the 'noise' of initial anxiety and 'alarm bells' that presage imminent disaster. There was a murmur of agreement, and a number of group members recalled episodes where comments like 'this can never be done' soon morphed into reflections of 'why didn't we do this years ago?'. Several shared examples of changes that they had been involved in. They problematised idealistic cause and effect notions of change management and shared far messier accounts of what they had found themselves doing in these situations. One of the participants said that in his experience, when tough decisions had to be made, political considerations often outweighed common sense. Paul commented that since completing MSOL, he is less anxious. He told the group that he pays more attention to what might be going on around him and does not feel that he must, or indeed can be, in control of this. As the allotted hour for the check in came to an end, I called time.

Later in the morning, we engaged in an experiential activity, an exercise that I was introduced to some years ago as 'All Change', but there are no doubt other titles given to it. Briefly, the exercise entails splitting the participants into an On-site group and a Central group. Given the numbers available, I allocated six participants to the On-site group, leaving two to make up the Central group. The exercise instructions state that the groups should be separated, so I escorted the Central group to a nearby breakout room and provided them with a copy of the following brief.

'All change'

Central Brief

You are the Central group.

Brief

You have 40 minutes to achieve the task outlined below. You must comply with the rules, and you are responsible for the completion of the task.

Task

You need to move the On-site group members from their present positions to their new positions but only by making the permitted moves.

The On-site group members are already in their starting positions.

Your task is to move the people who are on the right-hand side of the X facing left, to the left-hand side of the X still facing left and in their original sequence. And vice versa.

Rules

1 Only one person at a time from your group may liaise with the On-site group.
2 The remainder of the Central group must stay in this room.
3 The On-site group has been instructed to do nothing without your specific approval.
4 This brief must stay in this room.
5 There are only two permitted moves: (i) an On-site group member may move forward into an empty space, so long as the empty space is immediately in front of them; and (ii) an On-site group member may move forward and around one person if that person is facing him or her, and there is an empty space immediately behind that person.
6 No member of the On-site group can turn round; everyone must remain facing forward at all times.
7 Only one person may move at a time.
8 Success is defined as being a continuous mistake-free process from start to finish.

I returned to the main room and invited the members of the On-site group to take up the starting positions that I set out on the floor earlier this morning before anyone arrived. I handed one of the groups a copy of the On-site brief and instructed them to share it with the others:

'All change'

On-site brief

You are the On-site group.

Brief

- You are currently situated in your starting positions.
- You are required to remain in your allotted positions unless otherwise instructed by the Central group.
- You are required to remain in this room for the duration of the exercise.
- Communication with the other room is not permitted.
- Any failure to observe these rules will mean that you have failed the task.
- You may wish to discuss how you would like to work together.

Some backgrounds to the exercise might be useful at this point. The Central group is allowed to engage with the On-site group at any time they like, but in all

of my years of using this exercise, no Central group has ever been in a hurry to do so. There tends to be a 10–15 minute (sometimes longer) hiatus during which the Central group makes sense of the brief and, more often than not, they start to solve the problem without involving or having any contact with the On-site group. The On-site group, for their part, tend to comply with the brief and resist the temptation to converse with the Central group. During this period, On-site and Central group members are, respectively, apt to speculate and fantasise about the task and the motives of the other group. On-site groups tend to view themselves as subordinate to the Central groups, and even though the terms 'On-site' and 'Central' are used, in preference to 'staff' and 'managers', these organisational archetypes soon take precedence. The discussions following the exercise usually serve to deepen the problematisation of linear models of change as well as the inadequacies of mainstream conceptions of communication, and today was no exception. And this pretty much reflects what happened for this group. Following the exercise, we spent a good deal of time reflecting on aspects of the exercise that resonated with our lived experience. In the discussion, we problematised idealistic notions of how changes occur, acknowledging that we influence, but we do not control what happens.

And this brings us up to date. It's Friday afternoon. The participants have been working in three small groups (two threes and a pair) to prepare a short teach-back presentation on a chosen mainstream theory of change. Paul's small group chose Kotter's eight-step process for leading change (Kotter, 1996), and they decided to present first. Paul steps up to the front of the room to present on behalf of his group. Following the conversations that we have engaged in so far today, I anticipate a description of Kotter's eight steps, followed by a comprehensive critique of the model, based on comparisons with the real-life change processes Paul has experienced. Instead, Paul walks us through a 'change' that he has recently experienced with his team. He tells us that he sees a great deal of resonance between this model and his lived experience. In implementing the change, he recounts that he did indeed create a sense of urgency (Kotter's Step 1), by taking his team on an away day to discuss the change. He then established a guiding coalition (Kotter's Step 2); created a vision (Kotter's Step 3); communicated this vision, at a follow-up away day (Kotter's Step 4); and so on. Paul walks us through all eight of Kotter's steps articulating how they 'perfectly describe' what he and his team experienced.

When asked by a member of the group whether this was something new for the team, Paul says, 'No, not really'. He tells the group that the 'change' described was the preparation for and facilitation of an open day for prospective students. This was something that he and the team had been involved in many times previously, but this had been a bigger event than usual, and it was requested at relatively short notice. Another way of looking at Paul's narrative, then, is that Paul's team was asked at short notice to put on, what was for them, a routine event, albeit on a scale that they had not experienced before. This 'change' called for more planning (away day), and more support and encouragement from Paul than usual, as relief against

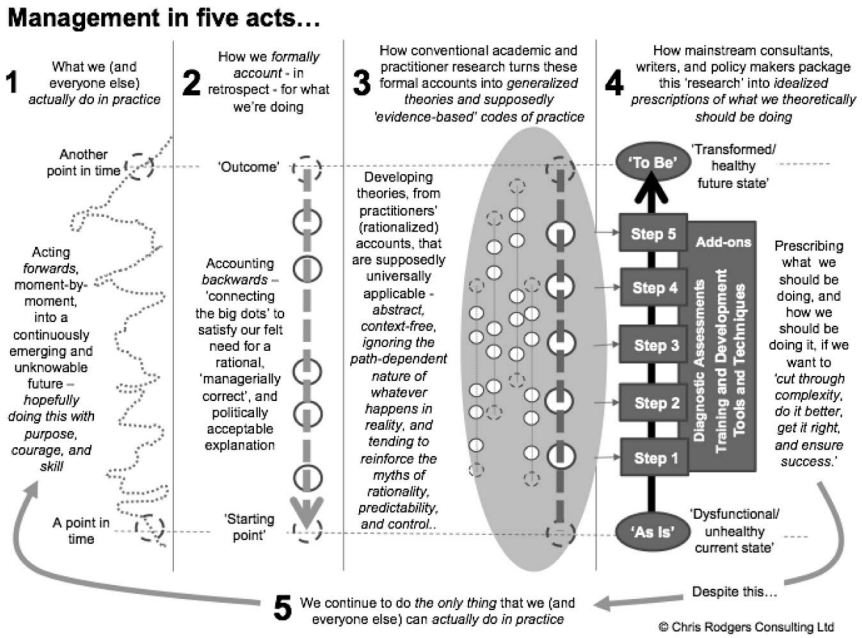

FIGURE 3.1 'Management in Five Acts'

Source: Chris Rodgers.

the potential anxiety provoked by the greater responsibility and increased workload (bigger event than usual and less time than they would usually have to organise).

Chris Rodgers' 'Management in Five Acts' (see Figure 3.1) offers a suggestion as to how abstract models and stepwise frameworks, like Kotter's eight steps, develop over time, as well as illustrating how far removed they are from our lived experience.

Act 1 provides a reality-congruent explanation of what we find ourselves doing each day in organisational (indeed, all) settings, that is, 'acting *forwards*, moment-by-moment, into a continuously emerging and unknowable future', and for Rodgers, '*hopefully doing this with purpose, courage and skill*'. Acts 2–4 outline the increasingly abstract 'acts' that might follow as we account for what we are doing to others (Act 2), how conventional researchers generalise these accounts into theories of practice (Act 3), and how 'mainstream consultants, writers and policy makers' package them as best practice prescriptions for what we all ought to be doing to move from a 'dysfunctional/unhealthy current state' to a 'transformed/ healthy future state' (Act 4). But as Rodgers points out in Act 5, 'we continue to do *the only thing* that we (and everyone else) can *actually do in practice*' and that is 'acting *forwards*, moment-by-moment, into a continuously emerging and unknowable future'.

The fact that Paul was able to retrospectively 'fit' what he and his colleagues found themselves doing into the Kotter model came as no surprise. As human beings, we have become adept at this form of post-rationalisation. Indeed, when participants in leadership development programmes encounter mainstream models and frameworks for the first time, they often exclaim that they have been taking this very approach for years but didn't have a label for it, and now they have. The two aspects of Paul's presentation that did surprise me were (i) how quickly the ordinary everyday activities that he and his team were involved in got lost in abstract conceptions of 'visionary leadership' and 'transformational change', and (ii) the absence of any critique. Kotter's model is a typical example of the idealised, linear, cause and effect recipes for change that we had been problematising in the morning sessions, yet not two hours later, Paul (a graduate of MSOL and a very vocal critic of idealised models of leadership and change earlier that day in the Community Meeting) finds himself advocating this model as a near-perfect articulation of the process that he and his team experienced.

Taking our experience seriously

> What if there is no alternative to a situation where information is all over the place and where meaning can only be made by many different people making sense together in many different groupings and conversations? What if this is the most effective way of developing knowledge when the future is so unpredictable?
>
> *Stacey et al. (2000)*

This incident with Paul and the group is an example of what Patricia Shaw (2010) describes as a 'vivid moment of experience'. For Shaw, these common points of reference act as catalysts for reflection – an opportunity to explore, make-sense, and come to a (shared) understanding of our experience. In the chapters to follow, reflective narrative accounts of experience, my own and those of fellow practitioners from Germany, the US, Denmark, and the UK, are shared as catalysts for the exploration of leadership development methodologies and the themes arising therein – points of reference for the exercise of reflexive curiosity. In this chapter, the themes arising in the Paul narrative that I want to explore are (i) the tenacity of mainstream conceptions of leadership and organisation in the face of experience to the contrary; (ii) the potential for leadership development programmes to become little more than what Edgar Schein (1961) describes as processes of coercive persuasion/brainwashing; (iii) organising and leading as complex responsive processes of relating; and (iv) the importance of reflexive curiosity, that is, sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement.

The tenacity of mainstream conceptions of leadership and organisation

> I don't believe just 'cos ideas are tenacious it means they're worthy.
>
> *Tim Minchin (2009)*

A superficial reading of Rodgers' graphic might suggest that he is arguing that Acts 2–4 have no real influence on us as 'we continue (Act 5) to do *the only thing* that we (and everyone else) can *actually do in practice*' and that is (Act 1), to act '*forwards*, moment-by-moment, into a continuously emerging and unknowable future' (see Figure 3.1, emphasis in the original).[3] In a recent publication, Rodgers unpacks his thinking in relation to the Five Acts graphic to clarify that although the prescriptive models and theories found in mainstream literature and adduced on conventional leadership development programmes, like the Kotter model that Paul presented in the narrative above, are poor representations of what actually occurs in reality, they do have the potential to influence what happens (Rodgers, 2021). Rodgers argues 'it is very difficult for managers to resist the pressures to be seen to be acting to make the formally adopted prescriptions work…however far removed from the complex reality of their everyday experience some of these might be' (ibid.: 96). As Grey and Costas argue, although artefacts like company accounts, annual reports, organisation charts and the like are merely 'representations of organizations, not organizations themselves … one cannot claim that the organisation and its representations are 'truly separate' as the 'various representations of organization also construct organization' (Grey and Costas, in Czarniawska, 2016: 136).

As outlined in Chapter 1, conventional conceptions of leadership and organisation, and the models, frameworks, and prescriptions that accompany them, are tenacious fixtures in the organisational *habitus*. The deceptive certainty (illusion of validity – Kahneman, 2011, 2013) that they provide is seductive, not least because of the high expectations that are now placed on leaders, exacerbated by the 'talking up of leadership' (Blom and Alvesson, 2015) that has occurred in recent years, as discussed in Chapter 2. Like Paul, many of the managers that I work with try to make the 'ought' (Act 4 in Rodgers' framework above) their reality. This diverts attention away from what they actually find themselves doing with others and blinds them to the ongoing emergent patterns of human interaction (the operational realities) that they are participating in, which in turn diminishes the potential for acting into them in more useful, creative, and spontaneous ways. What this means is that rather than making sense of what is happening and negotiating a way of going on together that resonates with those involved, extra effort is expended trying to implement, say, Step 3 of the chosen model, rather than working with what is actually going on and 'developing knowledge [that might be more helpful] when the future is so unpredictable' (Stacey *et al.*, 2000).

Patricia Shaw, one of the pioneers of the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, along with Ralph Stacey and Doug Griffin, argues that this ability to articulate what might be going on is lacking in the leader-managers who she works with. In her experience:

> Leaders are good at explanation, and they are very poor at description. They fail to be able to give detailed, telling, resonating, descriptive accounts of what happens and how it happens. They are too quick to move to wanting to find cause and effect, and too simplistic linear connections between events. They lack a kind of descriptive, reflective capacity to inquire into the way circumstances happen and change.
>
> *Shaw (2010)*

Taking our experience seriously involves noticing what might be right in front of our noses, hidden in plain sight (see Chapter 8). As illustrated by the narrative above, mainstream models and prescriptions appeal to the managerialist ideology that has become an invisible element in the organisational habitus; invisible to the extent that even in the act of acknowledging that there is something wrong with this picture, we can find ourselves repeatedly painting the same landscape. That is, we find it difficult to let go of our existing way of thinking even in the process of rejecting it. The simultaneous co-existence of these opposing perspectives is a paradox that goes some way to explaining why participants like Paul find themselves advocating models that are at odds with their lived experience, and why mainstream authors, like Collins and Hansen (2011), find themselves acknowledging the inherent complexity and ambiguity of (organisational) life at the same time as identifying the steps that their readers need to take in order to bring about certainty and control.

Nick Cave, the singer, songwriter, and author, argues that:

> The idea that we live life in a straight line, like a story, seems to me to be increasingly absurd and, more than anything, a kind of intellectual convenience. I feel that the events in our lives are like a series of bells being struck and the vibrations spread outwards, affecting everything, our present, and our futures, of course, but our past as well. Everything is changing and vibrating and in flux.
>
> *Nick Cave (2017)*

I contend that mainstream conceptions of organisation and leadership are 'an intellectual convenience' that keeps us from having to describe the 'flux' of our day-to-day experience. Stacey (2012) argues that abstractions of this nature serve several functions. First, they are used as rhetorical devices to persuade. Having worked for a consultancy that based its approach to change management engagements on the Kotter model, I can certainly vouch for this. Second, they can be used as a defence against the anxiety of not knowing. During turbulent times, the belief that you, or whosoever you are looking to for guidance, have a roadmap for the future can be

comforting – however illusory this might prove to be. Indeed, Hirschhorn (1995) drawing on Winnicott (1965) argues that abstract models are 'transitional objects' that allow managers to avoid the day-to-day anxiety of dealing with their own emotions by hiding behind tools and techniques, thus masking 'the real dilemmas of managing' (Hirschhorn, 1995: 119). The false certainty that Collins and Hansen (2011) offer falls into this category. And third, abstract models, frameworks, and roadmaps can be used as a means of 'disciplinary power' (Stacey, 2012). That is, as tools for monitoring and control which, in the case of stepwise models like Kotter's, might involve checking that leader-managers have followed all steps effectively.

Working in the flux of our day-to-day experience involves letting go of the intellectual convenience afforded by conventional conceptions of leadership and organisation and working with how things are rather than how mainstream authors contend they 'ought' to be. Taking our experience seriously involves paying attention to what we find ourselves doing as we go about the ordinary everyday activities that constitute work. For leader-managers, leadership and organisational development practitioners, and executive educators this means thinking differently, it means working differently. For me, this involves taking a different approach to leadership and organisation, leadership and organisation development, and executive education; for me this means taking a complexity approach to leadership development in practice. As outlined above, I share what this looks like for me, not with a view to converting you to my way of thinking, but as a means of stimulating your reflexive curiosity. Presenting conventional thinking as the only game in town runs the risk of leadership development programmes becoming little more than a form of coercive persuasion (Schein, 1961). Something Stacey refers to as 'corrective training' (Stacey, 2011: 18).

Leadership development as coercive persuasion/ corrective training

Schein coined the phrase 'coercive persuasion' to describe development interventions designed to bring about attitudinal change (Schein, 1989: 426). He compared the induction and development of managers with (i) the induction and development of novice nuns in convent schools, and (ii) the 'thought reform' processes practised on civilian political prisoners during the Korean War (ibid.: 426–427). Schein highlights management development programmes that 'remove the participant for some length of time from his normal routine … thus providing a kind of moratorium during which he can take stock of himself and determine where he is going and where he wants to go' (ibid.: 433). He argues that the 'brainwashing' techniques employed during such moratoria include:

1 Prevention from leaving the learning experience.
2 Intense interpersonal and psychological pressure to destabilise sense of self and current beliefs and values.

3 Learners are put into teams so that those at more advanced stages of moving to new culture can mentor those at less advanced stages.
4 The team is rewarded if all its members demonstrate that they have learned the collective values.
5 The new values … are presented in many different forms.

Schein (1961)

Schein argues that we can become oblivious to the use of coercive techniques if we believe that what we are doing is in some way 'legitimate':

> [W]e cannot ignore that the same methods of learning, i.e., coercive persuasion or, colloquially, brainwashing, can be and are being used equally for goals that we deplore and goals that we accept. If we deplore the goals we condemn the methods, forgetting or denying that we are using the same methods in our organizations for goals that we consider legitimate.
>
> *Schein (1999: 170)*

Stacey does not perceive corrective training as negative per se, arguing that 'complex modern organisations cannot function without the techniques of surveillance, hierarchical normalisation and corrective training' (2011: 18). However, he argues that 'when leadership theories and leadership development programmes focus attention on idealised and, thus, unrealistic theories … the danger … is that the techniques of disciplinary power are utilised in completely taken-for-granted ways which are not open to question or critical reflection. This makes it possible for the techniques to be taken up in increasingly extreme ways which produce counterproductive domination and block creativity and innovation' (ibid.).

The reason for introducing this concept is to draw attention to the fact that in my experience, corporate and business school leadership development programmes have become steeped in managerialist ways of thinking, with little if any acknowledgement being given to other perspectives on leadership and organisation, let alone explored and given serious consideration. I contend that not exploring a plurality of perspectives with participants in leadership development programmes is a form of coercive persuasion. The same goes for programmes that privilege critical management and/or complexity perspectives on leadership and organisation. They should explore and/or give serious consideration to conventional views, not only to avoid the same accusation but also to ensure that participants are not left exposed, that is, lacking the practical wisdom required to judge when to challenge and when to play the game with a 'display of willing acceptance' (Stacey, 2011: 9, drawing on Ofshe, 2000).

So far, I have referred to the perspective that informs the complexity approach to leadership and organisation that I have been working with – the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating – almost in passing. This would seem to

be an appropriate point in the book at which to explain and explore the key aspects of this perspective more fully.

The perspective of complex responsive processes of relating

> You will not change the world tomorrow by thinking differently, but you may find that you have a more fruitful and interesting experience as a manager or as a teacher or adviser of managers.
>
> *Stacey and Mowles (2016)*

The following explication of the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating is my take on the thinking of Stacey *et al.* (2000), Stacey (2010, 2012), Griffin (2002), Shaw (2002), Mowles (2011, 2015), and Stacey and Mowles (2016) – thinking that has most definitely helped to make my experience as a manager, teacher, and adviser of managers more 'fruitful and interesting' (ibid.: 21). If my account of the perspective resonates with something that you have become aware of in your own thinking/practice, then I would encourage you to find the time to engage directly with the source material. A useful starting point? The titles above, the DMan theses that the vignettes in this book are taken from (see Chapters 4–6) and/or any of the publications from the last 15 years that are freely available.[4] And should you choose to do so, I am confident that your investment of time and effort will be more than adequately repaid. Also, since publication of the first edition of *Leadership Development: A Complexity Approach*, in March 2018, there would appear to be a more general acceptance that (organisational) life is complex; that is, unpredictable, uncertain, and uncontrollable; a shift catalysed in part by our experience of the pandemic. This has catalysed not only a renewed interest in complexity approaches to leadership and organisation but also the publication of a number of excellent books by authors drawing on the work of Stacey *et al.* and the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating. Some are directly from members of the DMan research community (Mowles, 2021; Mowles and Norman, 2022; Chauhan *et al.*, 2022; Sarra *et al.*, 2022). And others from thinkers who have found their way to the perspective in other ways (Cole and Higgins, 2021, 2023; Rodgers, 2021; Varney, 2021).

Ralph Stacey and colleagues

Ralph Stacey was born in South Africa. After completing a first degree in economics at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (for which he won prizes for his work in economic modelling), he came to the UK to complete a Masters and then a PhD in economic forecasting using sophisticated statistical models at the London School of Economics. He moved to the UK permanently in 1970, to take up the first of a number of senior management roles in planning for major corporations and in strategy for a firm of stockbrokers in the City of London. In 1985, he joined UH as a lecturer (Mowles, 2017).

During his years in industry, Stacey came to recognise how bad we humans are at forecasting and how rational, linear, cause and effect approaches to organising offer little by way of explanation for the many surprises, both pleasant and unpleasant, that life in organisations seems to continually throw up. Consequently, he became interested in what it is that we are all doing together in organisations when involved in activities like forecasting, and how, in spite of all the rational planning methods contained in the academic textbooks that he was now expected to share with students on the MBA programme, we are continually surprised by what actually plays out. Thus, if the world we live in is inherently uncertain and unpredictable, and management 'science' offers little beyond futile attempts (my words) to make it so, where do we go from here? For Stacey, who already had an interest in mathematical modelling and non-linear dynamics, the next step was to explore what the complexity sciences – the sciences of uncertainty – might have to offer (ibid).

Computer models of non-linear phenomena, like the weather, produce unpredictable, yet coherent, population-wide patterns comprising the thousands of agents (bits of computer code) that make up the programme. The population-wide patterns that emerge are not the result of a predetermined plan, nor are they controlled or controllable by the agents. The patterns that emerge in these complex adaptive systems (CAS) are predictable and unpredictable at the same time. Each agent in a CAS model is connected to a small number of agents in the total population and each agent can only act/interact in accordance with the principles that govern them (that is, how they have been coded to act by the programmer). As the agents interact, and self-organise in CAS terms, population-wide patterns emerge.

Stacey's early publications explore what it means to move from thinking about organisations as cybernetic systems (machines made up of parts that contribute to a whole that can be designed and manipulated at will), to thinking about organisations as CAS (patterns of interaction between agents which are predictable and unpredictable at the same time, where global patterns emerge in processes of self-organisation that cannot be designed in advance or controlled at will by any of the agents involved). However, after being challenged on this by Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw (Stacey's PhD students who joined him in setting up the DMan at UH), Stacey's thinking soon shifted. What Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw realised is that, unlike agents in computer programmes, humans have the capacity to become aware of the patterns that we are caught up in, and to articulate something of this, to ourselves and others. In addition to this, although we are both enabled and constrained in our relations with others, unlike agents in a computer programme, we have the potential to act spontaneously.

Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw draw on the 'pragmatism of G. H. Mead (1934, 1938) and the process sociology of Norbert Elias (2000, 2001)' (Mowles, 2017) to explain their experience of trying to get things done with others in organisational settings. This revelation re the limitations of CAS to explain human interaction is

worth reiterating because many so-called complexity perspectives, stop short of this. Dennis Tourish puts this well when he argues:

> A number of researchers have embraced complexity theory, with its emphasis on non-linearity and unpredictability. However…they continue to assume that leaders can exercise rational, extensive, and purposeful influence on other actors to a greater extent than is possible. In effect, they offer a theory of complex organizations led by non-complex leaders who establish themselves by relatively non-complex means. This testifies to the enduring power of 'heroic' images of leader agency. Without greater care, the terminology offered by complexity leadership theory could become little more than a new mask for old theories that legitimize imbalanced power relationships in the workplace.
>
> *Tourish (2019: 219)*

In his article, Tourish problematises complexity theories based on the premise that organisations are CAS (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2011). He draws on process sociology (Tsoukas, 2017) and CMS (Ford, 2009; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) to offer a more complex understanding ('critical communication propositions') of how leadership emerges and is sustained (ibid: 221). In concluding that 'complexity theory has not been applied consistently to explore how leadership itself emerges as an organizational phenomenon' and that 'its theoretical and critical potential remains to be realized' (ibid: 233), Tourish seems to have overlooked the perspective of complex responsive processes. Stacey et al have been working with 'process and communication theories' (ibid: 220) for over 30 years. Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw were interested in understanding what they, and the researcher-practitioners they worked with, were experiencing in the everyday politics of life in organisations. They concluded that while CAS are, and continue to be, a useful source domain from which useful analogies can be drawn to make sense of what might be happening in organisational (and all other) settings, organisations are not CAS.

Organisation: A working definition

Barbara Czarniawska, drawing on Shenhav (1999), argues that 'in the late 1960s, organization theorists changed the dominant meaning of the term *organization* so as to be able to import systems theory' (Czarniawska, in Robichaud and Cooren, 2013: 3, emphasis in original). She argues for a distinction between organisation and the process of organising. She contends that one might categorise organisation as the artefacts – buildings, systems, policies and procedures, governance structures, etc. – and organising (Weick, 1979) as the social processes that construct the artefacts that help people to organise (Czarniawska, 2014). So, although we can control the artefacts of organisation, we cannot control the social processes of organising that created them in the first place. This resonates with my working

definition for organisation, drawing on the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating.

I define organisation as the artefacts – buildings, infrastructure, information systems, policies, procedures, etc. And organising as the ongoing patterns of communicative interaction between those interdependent human beings who have a stake in the organisation. However, one cannot separate organisation from organising, as it is only in these ongoing patterns of communicative interaction that organisation comes to life. They are two sides of the same coin. Phenomena like leadership and strategy emerge, or don't, in the give-and-take of the many differing aspirations and intentions of all involved. Our identities (roles, personas, ways of being) are shaped, whilst simultaneously shaping the identities of others, in patterns of local interaction. It is in the interplay of these local patterns, that global patterns emerge. What happens locally influences the global at the same time as what happens globally enables and constrains the local. Patterns of interaction simply lead to further interactions; no more no less. There is no equilibrium to be found, and no optimum state to be reached. They are predictable and unpredictable at the same time, they do not exist outside of our participation in them, and they cannot be designed and/or controlled by any one or small group of individuals at will; irrespective of how much influence they have.

The difference between the complexity approach and other complexity perspectives

Do I think I've nailed it? No more than I nailed the definition of leadership in Chapter 2, but this definition draws attention to several key concepts that other perspectives claiming to take complexity seriously ignore, misunderstand, or misconstrue. Namely, (i) interdependence, (ii) local interaction and emergence, (iii) participation (in the game), and (iv) paradox (Stacey and Mowles, 2016).[5] Let's take each of these in turn.

Interdependence

Interdependence involves more than simply acknowledging that as human beings we are reliant on each other. It means letting go of our conception of human beings as autonomous individuals. We cannot do whatever we want. We are enabled and constrained by, at the same time as enabling and constraining, each other. That is, we are interdependent. This fundamentally challenges mainstream perspectives of leadership based on individual psychology and leadership development interventions based on narrow conceptions of power and what it means to be self-aware. The implications of this radically different way of thinking for coaching, and the use and usefulness of psychometric tools and 360° feedback in leadership development programmes, are explored in Chapter 4.

Local interaction and emergence

Local interaction describes what in complexity science terms is known as self-organisation. Stacey and colleagues prefer local interaction to self-organisation because self-organisation is regularly misinterpreted by the managers they are working with to mean some form of free for all, where all do what they please. Local interaction points to the fact that even though we might be caught up in population-wide patterns of interaction that we describe as organisation, we only regularly interact with a very small number of that overall population – our team, the team of managers we get together with, and representatives from the groups we support and/or support us. Thus, interactions are local. Similarly, emergence is often taken to mean 'whatever will be, will be' and/or is viewed as some mysterious process that we have little influence over. However, for Stacey and colleagues, the exact opposite is true. Emergence is not something magical or mystical; instead, it is a description of how the global patterns of human interaction – which we call organisations – emerge in the interplay of the intentions of all involved in many, many local interactions. And, as outlined above, we cannot simply do as we please, but this does not mean that we do nothing, and it certainly does not mean that we do not try to influence things in our favour.

Taking a complexity approach involves accepting that we cannot predetermine what happens in local interaction and therefore we cannot control what might emerge in the global patterning. It is not that we don't try to influence what we would like to see happen in the macro, through restructures, strategic plans, policy changes and the like, but rather that we might understand such things as gestures that might influence but will not control what actually happens in the micro. We can influence and our influence might be great, but we cannot control. What plays out will depend on how such gestures are taken up (responded to) in local interaction. The implications for leadership and leadership development are that we might pay more attention to what we find ourselves doing with others in local communicative interaction (conversation), as well as exploring communication as ongoing processes of gesture and response (Mead, 1934), areas that will be explored in Chapter 5.

Participation in the game

One cannot separate oneself from the patterns of interaction that one is caught up in, and the patterns of interaction that we are caught up in are shaping us at the same time as we are shaping them. From this perspective, conceptions like adaptive leadership, where leaders can be on the balcony looking down at the dance (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002), do not make sense. There is no stepping outside of these patterns of interaction to see the 'big picture' before stepping back in to fix, shape, or control the patterns that emerge. This does not mean that we cannot or should not speculate about what might be happening in the 'big picture', but we

should not kid ourselves that speculations are any more than that. There is no stepping out of the dance. Instead of viewing leader-managers as objective observers, a complexity approach sees leader-managers as participative inquirers (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 33). From this perspective, leadership development is about helping participants to develop the capacity for becoming more detached in their involvement in the game (Elias, 1970). In Chapter 6, I explore how team-building exercises, Outward Bound-type interventions, simulations, and live case studies might be engaged with more fruitfully to encourage the development of this capability.

Paradox

In organisational life, we encounter many contradictions. We invite diversity and then ask those who affect difference only to do so in ways that we already feel comfortable with. We pursue alignment, so that everyone is 'on the same page' at the same time as encouraging creativity and innovation. From the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, paradoxes like forming and being formed, the co-existence of the non-linearity and messiness of change, and the 'perfection' of the Kotter model for Paul cannot be resolved. They can only be lived with and explored. In Chapter 7, I explore the use of Action Learning Sets in leadership development programmes and argue that there is much in Revans' (1980) original philosophy to support the exploration of paradox. However, this has been lost over the years with the Learning (in relation to the creation of new knowledge) and Set (in respect of exploring group dynamics) aspects of Action Learning Sets being played down and the focus being placed on the Action element, which often means ignoring, collapsing, or adopting a 'this and then that' (first one side, then the other) approach to paradox.

The implications for leadership and leadership development

Working from the above definition of organisation, leadership is merely one of the many phenomena (patterns) that emerge in the local and population-wide patterns of human, social, and communicative interaction that we call organisation. As outlined in Chapter 2, leadership is a social and relational phenomenon. That is, one does not get to choose whether one is recognised as a leader or not. Leadership, if it does emerge, is something that is co-created in social interaction. Consequently, it makes no sense to talk about one's leadership style or approach, whether authentic, distributed, transformational, authoritarian, etc., because how such a gesture is responded to by others is not within one's gift. As generic descriptors of intent, these concepts have limited utility; but as recipes or roadmaps for how one might participate as a leader-manager in local interaction, they are fairly meaningless.

So, if taking a complexity approach to leadership development means neither encouraging participants to conform to a certain style of leadership nor advocating abstract conceptions of what mainstream researchers and authors think leaders

ought to be learning/doing, what does it involve? In other words, what is it that I find myself doing as a leader of leadership development? Well, I am bound to say that there is no formula; leadership development programmes are also complex responsive processes of relating, and every programme is different. However, I do set out with a clear structure in mind and some specific ideas for what we might engage with as a learning community. So, what are the key themes that I point to and hope to explore in taking a complexity approach to leadership development?

First*, navigating the everyday politics of organisational life*. That is, becoming aware of the games we are caught up in, becoming more adept in the playing of them, and keeping in mind that in the playing of them, we are simultaneously played. Second, *awareness of the context(s) in which we find ourselves*. This involves paying attention to the patterns emerging in local (your team and the individuals/teams you and/or your team regularly interact with) and global (wider organisational, sector, societal) interactions and acting accordingly. Third, *awareness of self in relation to/with others and finding one's way in groups*. This entails working with affect and living with uncertainty and the anxiety that this provokes. Fourth, *acknowledging the shadow side of leading-managing*. That is, being aware of the potential for leaders to become idealised and/or for hubris to set in, leading to denigration (Stacey, 2012) and/or derailment (de Haan and Kasozi, 2014). Fifth, *exploring the importance of stewardship* and our responsibilities to the triple bottom line – people, planet, and profit. Sixth, *creating spaces for reflective and reflexive inquiry* (Shaw, 2005). Patricia Shaw argues that 'our traditional understanding of control – of being able to trace simple chains of cause and effect, of re-engineering the form of our organizational activities – is proving illusory' (ibid.: 19). She contends that 'this is leading us to explain continuity and change as arising through intensive processes of joint inquiry amongst diverse participants. The focus is shifting from the design of outcomes to the design of, and participation in, inquiry processes' (ibid.). And finally, *enhancing the capacities* that help with all of the above, namely, *sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement*.

Reflexive curiosity – Sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement

As outlined earlier, there are topics that I will be covering in a chapter or part thereof that some authors have written multiple books about, and/or dedicated whole research careers to. The topics of sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement most definitely fall into this category. However, in this case, although this is the only section that directly explores sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement, in one way or another, the whole book is dedicated to this concept. I say concept, rather than concepts, as I see sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement as intertwined elements of the same process. That is, it would be impossible to say where one starts and the other(s) end(s). They are inseparable elements of the process that I have termed reflexive curiosity. And as with leadership and

organisation and leadership and management in earlier chapters, the splitting of sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement here is purely a literary device to aid comprehension.

Sense-making

> To appreciate organizations and their environments as flows interrupted by constraints of one's own making, is to take oneself a little less seriously, to find a little more leverage in human affairs on a slightly smaller scale, and to have a little less hubris and a little more fun … In the last analysis, organizing is about fallible people who keep going.
>
> *Karl E. Weick (2001: xi)*

Weick *et al.* (2005) summarise sense-making as having a 'genesis in disruptive ambiguity'. For them, it begins with 'acts of noticing and bracketing … a mixture of retrospect and prospect' with a 'reliance on presumptions to guide action'. It is a social and interdependent activity whereby:

> Answers to the question "what's the story?" emerge from retrospect, connections with past experience, and dialogue among people who act on behalf of larger social units. Answers to the question "now what?" emerge from presumptions about the future, articulation concurrent with action, and projects that become increasingly clear as they unfold.
>
> *ibid.: 413*

Maitlis and Christianson view sense-making as 'an activity that is central to organising', defining it as 'the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations' and they argue that it is central to the 'key organizational processes of change, learning and creativity and innovation' (2014: 57). They also explore two more recent constructs that they feel contribute to an understanding of how sense-making occurs in organisations: (i) sensegiving and (ii) sensebreaking. They describe sensegiving as a process that is 'often studied in the context of how organizational leaders or managers strategically shape the sensemaking of organizational members through the use of symbols, images, and other influence techniques', although they also acknowledge that it is 'not simply a top-down process … as those receiving sensegiving have their own interpretations and can actively resist efforts from leaders to influence strategic change' (ibid.: 67). And they describe sensebreaking as a process in which people are asked to 're-consider the sense that they have already made, to question their underlying assumptions, and to re-examine their course of action' (ibid.: 69). They argue that sensebreaking is 'often a prelude to sensegiving, in which leaders or organizations fill the meaning void created through sensebreaking with new meaning' (ibid.).

Maitlis and Christianson identify three things that trigger sense-making in organisations:

- environmental jolts and organizational crises.
- threats to identity … individual and group identity.
- planned change interventions – sensebreaking and sensegiving by new leaders.

2014: 71–75

For Maitlis and Christianson, sense-making is triggered by events or incidents where 'the meaning is ambiguous and/or the outcomes uncertain', that is, situations that 'interrupt people's ongoing flow, disrupting their understanding of the world and creating uncertainty about how to act' (ibid.: 70). However, they also argue that even when there are such 'discrepant cues', they may not trigger sense-making 'if group norms or the organizational culture mitigate against it'. They offer examples from their research where 'people accommodate, explain away, or normalize discrepant cues' (ibid.). One of the reasons they give for this is that habitual routines often reduce mindfulness.

I would agree and I would also argue that the opposite occurs, where in the absence of discrepant cues some leaders will seek to trigger what might be described as sensebreaking and sensegiving as a means of stamping their authority, making their mark, or delivering on the promises made at interview to effect change, etc. However, as pointed out previously, they cannot control how such gestures are taken up by others. For example, I would describe my dissemination of Kotter's (1996) eight-step recipe for transformational change to participants on MSOL as a form of *sensesharing*. However, Paul's response to this gesture was to see it as the perfect framework through which to describe his experience. That is, what I offered as sensesharing was taken up as sensegiving.

Czarniawska (2014) differentiates between three types of logic that are used in sense-making: (i) the logic of practice, (ii) the logic of theory, and drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) conception of officialization, (iii) the logic of representation. She describes the logic of practice as 'concrete (situated in time and space) … discursively incomplete … drawing as it does on a fragmentary understanding of "tacit knowledge" and expressed in narratives that are chronologically ordered' (Czarniawska, 2014: 11). The logic of theory is described as 'abstract', hiding 'its rhetorical accomplishments' behind 'claims to formal logic' and 'methodological criteria of truth' (ibid.). The logic of representation is also described as 'abstract … but often [uses] Hypothetical concrete examples', 'rhetorically sophisticated', it uses 'stylized narratives' thatborrow their 'legitimacy' from the logics of theory and practice' (ibid.).

Czarniawska argues that the 'current logic of representation demands a kind of imitation of the logic of theory, legitimated by the claim that it originated in the logic of practice. Difficult, but not impossible!' (2014: 11). This resonates with

my experience of Paul's presentation of the Kotter model at the beginning of this chapter. Paul legitimated Kotter's framework by claiming that it was a perfect representation of what happened for him in practice. As noted, above, the tenacity of mainstream models and theories is partly explained by the utility they offer as a defence against anxiety and as rhetorical devices to persuade. They offer what Kahneman (2013) describes as the illusion of validity.

The concept of sense-making that I am pointing to is more mundane than the sense-making referred to by Weick *et al*., Maitlis and Christianson, and Czarniawska, as it also proceeds in the absence of crisis, threats, or planned change. This is one of the reasons why I feel it is necessary to differentiate between sense-making and sense-making. Sense-making is paradoxically both an individual cognitive process and a social phenomenon at the same time. Sense-making is simultaneously retrospective and future-oriented, as it emerges in the living present. Sense-making is both ongoing and episodic at the same time. That is, the sense-making process may well be punctuated by episodic crises, but it is also an ongoing process that doesn't and shouldn't just occur as the result of novelty. Unlike sense-making, which is seen as something that is triggered by difference and/or disruption, sense-making (reflexivity and practical judgement) is something that we should initiate even as things seem to be going swimmingly.

Mead (1934) used the term 'social objects' to draw attention to the generalised tendencies of people to act in similar/familiar ways in similar/familiar situations. These similar ways/situations tend to generate habitual, repetitive, and unconscious ways of thinking and acting. Mead argued that when social objects become idealised, i.e., stripped of all constraint and contestation, they are more aptly termed 'cult values'. For example, Mead (1932) argued that democracy is a cult value, as is treating others with respect. As Farhad Dalal argues, it's not about 'whether cult beliefs and values are true or not: the issue is that we are unable to notice that some of our beliefs and values…are specific to our cult' and have the potential to blind us to the existence of 'alternative ways of thinking' (Dalal, 2023: 2). For Mead, if cult values are then applied without making allowances for alternative ways of thinking, we risk creating a cult that excludes all those that do not comply. I contend that concepts like managerialism, efficiency, and standardisation have become cult values. Indeed, one of the reasons why leadership development programmes are often experienced as form of coercive persuasion/corrective training is because of the requirement to unquestioningly accept such ways of thinking; where not being seen to fit in, risks exclusion.

Elias (1970), Crozier and Friedberg (1980), and Bourdieu (1990) use the term *games* to describe what Mead refers to as social objects and cult values. For Elias (1970), games are sustained in figurations of power, where those who benefit most from the game being played according to existing norms and values work hard to exclude those who call this into question. Elias argues that the ability to become a little more detached in our involvement is a difficult but important capacity to develop in order to ensure that we do not get caught up in games (patterns of power

relating) that are unhelpful, unethical, or destructive (Elias, 1956). For Crozier and Friedberg (1980), it is important to try to understand the 'power games which indirectly structure the strategies of the actors involved and [that] constrain freedom of choice' (ibid.: 6). Elias argues that it is 'difficult for players to comprehend that their inability to control the game derives from their mutual dependence and positioning as players, and from the tensions and conflicts inherent in [the] intertwining network' of the game (Elias, 1972: 87). Bourdieu argues that although no individual player can control the game, they can increase their power chances by accumulating 'cultural capital' (1990: 125).

These concepts are explored more fully in Chapters 6, 8, and throughout the rest of the book. I draw attention to them here to highlight the importance of becoming more detached in our involvement, as this may lead us to question those ways of working and being that we currently consider routine, habitual or 'natural' – to become more reflexive.

Reflexivity

> If we practise detachment from our thoughts we learn to observe them as though we are taking a bird's eye view of our own thinking. When we do this, we might find that our thinking belongs to an older, and different, story to the one we are now living.
>
> *Philippa Perry (2012: 111)*

Reflexivity is one of the concepts that participants find difficult to practice and often struggle to differentiate from reflection. Stacey and Mowles describe reflexivity as 'being aware of the impact on how one thinks of both one's personal history and the history and traditions of thought of one's community' (2016: 36). Cunliffe and Jun argue that reflexivity is 'concerned with understanding the grounds of our thinking [which involves] engaging in the reflexive act of questioning the basis of our thinking, surfacing the taken for granted rules underlying organisational decisions, and examining critically our own practices and ways of relating with others' (2005: 227). And Alvesson and Spicer describe reflexivity by outlining what occurs when it is not present. They argue that:

> [One of the] telltale aspects of functional stupidity…is an *absence of reflexivity*. This happens when we stop asking questions about our assumptions. Put simply, it involves taking for granted what other people commonly think. We often fail to question dominant beliefs and expectations. We see rules, routines and norms as completely natural: they are just as things are.
>
> *Alvesson and Spicer (2016: 77, emphasis in the original)*

What I take from the above descriptions is that reflexivity involves becoming aware that our ways of thinking/acting are not natural, foundational truths, but

ways of thinking/acting that have developed over time and have become part of the personal and collective understandings available to the communities in which we live and work. These ways of thinking/acting may well be 'just as things are' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016: 78), but that does not mean that we cannot challenge them, particularly when they are no longer useful to us and/or those around us. Paul's description of the change model would have been readily accepted as a routine aspect of any of the conventional leadership development programmes that I have participated in as a manager. However, as facilitator, taking a complexity approach, Paul's description was what Shaw (2010) describes as a 'vivid moment of experience'. As outlined above, this is a 'moment of common reference that you can point to, explore together, come to an understanding and sense-making together that really has meaning for people in their everyday activity' (ibid.). That is, an opportunity for reflexivity – a chance to notice and think about how we are thinking. In the case of the narrative above, it is an opportunity to explore conventional, critical, and complexity perspectives on change and compare these with our lived experience. As outlined in previous chapters, this raises doubts and, potentially, disillusionment. The decision as to whether one shares this with others (questions the game) requires practical judgement.

Practical judgement

> I say make a mark, put a foot onto the path, see (and feel and think) how it lands; and then you can make a good guess about where to put the next foot.
>
> *Phillipa Perry (2012: 127)*

There are many terms used for what I am referring to as practical judgement. Aristotle used the term *phronesis*, which translates from the original Greek as prudence or practical wisdom (Eikeland, 2006). I prefer the term *practical judgement* (Hager, 2000) over *practical wisdom* as this reminds me of the deliberative nature of phronesis, and the fact that we do not and will not always judge right. Deliberation is a characteristic of Aristotle's original conception that is often lost in (mis)interpretations of phronesis as some form of sixth sense, intuition, magic, or mystical touch. Hager, after Noel (1999), argues that there are three main categories of phronesis as described in the literature: (i) acting rationally, (ii) responding to the particulars of the context, and (iii) taking into account the ethical implications of the courses of action that one is considering (Hager, 2000: 282). When Hager wrote his piece, he felt that the available interpretations of Aristotelian phronesis fell short of capturing all three categories, although he concedes that Dunne (1993) came close. I contend that Eikeland's explication does contain all three of the categories identified by Noel (1999) and more.

Eikeland argues that Aristotle saw phronesis as both an intellectual and an ethical virtue; that is, one cannot be '(intellectually) prudent (phrónimoi) without being

(ethically) good' (2006: 20). Eikeland's definition of phronesis puts this ethical dimension of phronesis front and centre:

> Phrónêsis does not try to manipulate, or merely persuade, but must present its own thinking and reasons for deciding and acting in certain ways as openly as possible to the mindful judgement of others, trying to show, and convince, making them see, but still respecting their autonomy … Phrónêsis must take into consideration where the others are, emotionally, intellectually, and in their skills and attitudes, in trying to find the right thing to do, but it cannot use these circumstances manipulatively trying to set through some hidden agenda, without ruining itself qua phrónêsis. It must know how to deal with egotistical, strategic, manipulative behaviour in others without itself becoming like this, but also without simply being subdued by it and letting such behaviour prevail in others and in general.
>
> *ibid.: 34–35*

Eikeland's definition resonates with Khurana's (2007) view of manager as steward and Kellerman's (2012) caution to 'followers' to avoid colluding with the 'manipulative' behaviours of 'egotistical' senior executives. Eikeland's understanding of Aristotle's conception of phronesis is rather more idealistic and individualistic than my conception of practical judgement, but as an aspiration for how one might play into the role of leader-manager, I think it has merit. My claims for practical judgement are far more modest and involve the articulation of a next step into an unknown future that resonates with you and those around you. That is, having made sense of the context and/or situation in which we find ourselves and explored the thinking that influenced and/or is sustaining this current state, it is about identifying and articulating a next step into the unknown in the knowledge that this will inevitably have intended and unintended consequences, some of which might not become apparent for some time. However, as pointed out above, this is not a three-step linear process, as practical judgement involves sense-making and reflexivity, while reflexivity involves sense-making and practical judgement, and so on.

Sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement are descriptors for what we already do as leader-managers, whether we are conscious of it or not. I am arguing that what Paul and the rest of us find ourselves doing on a day-to-day basis is akin to Rodgers' Act 1 ('acting *forwards*, moment-by-moment, into a continuously emerging and unknowable future'), even if we find ourselves explaining what we are doing in the language of Act 4 ('*cut[ting] through complexity … and ensuring success*'). In Chapters 4–7, I explore a variety of conventional leadership development interventions with a view to illustrating how taking a complexity approach might help participants to navigate 'what is' rather than spending an inordinate amount of time worrying about how things 'ought to be'. Or, to use Weick's terminology, helping them 'to find a little more leverage in human affairs … to have a little less hubris and a little more fun' (2001: xi).

Notes

1 For a comprehensive description of 'Making Sense of Leading' (and a definition of 'broadly critical'), see Flinn and Mowles (2014).
2 The Community Meeting is an opportunity for the group, at the beginning of each workshop, to catch up, share what they have been thinking about since our last meeting, and discuss their experience and experiences of the theme for the day. The name and process of the Community Meeting is a variation of what I experienced on the DMan programme at UH; see Chapter 7 and Flinn and Mowles (2014).
3 The 'wiggly' line, depicting the 'acting forwards' from 'a point in time' to 'another point in time', suggests some form of progress. From the perspective of complex responsive processes, patterns of interaction may be changing, and time will be passing, but these patterns of interaction don't 'go' anywhere. In a recent conversation with Rodgers, Chris confirmed that his metaphor is temporal 'even if its representation in the line diagram is (unavoidably!) spatial'.
4 Search on Google Scholar, and/or look at the following blogs: (i) Chris Mowles, available at https://reflexivepractice.wordpress.com and (ii) Complexity Management Centre, available at https://complexityandmanagement.wordpress.com.
5 For a painstaking analysis of the similarities and differences in the way that interdependence, emergence, participation, and paradox are taken up in conventional, critical, and alternative complexity perspectives, compared to how these four criteria are understood from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, see Stacey and Mowles (2016).

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4

COACHING, PSYCHOMETRICS, AND 360° FEEDBACK

A collusion of coaches?

I attended an event not so long ago where the topic under discussion was the situations in which it is appropriate for a coach to challenge a coachee. Most of the audience were practising coaches – some experienced, some new. It was an interactive session involving a mixture of presentations, and small group and whole group discussion. The speaker also used role play and simulation to illustrate some of the situations discussed and called on members of the 15-strong audience to join her at the front of the room to act out the scenes that she and/or we wanted to explore. Towards the end of the session, the question of what to do if a team member is unwilling to be coached was raised. Having decided that this scenario would be a useful scene to see played out, the speaker asked me to play the role of the manager and the person sitting next to me to play the role of the reluctant team member.

I dutifully stood up to perform my role and the speaker asked me to explain to 'my team member' what needed to change. I fell easily, albeit uncomfortably, into the character I was invited to portray and found myself describing how this team member had struggled to transition to the new way of working that the organisation had adopted some six months previously. The speaker then invited me to join her and the team member in a three-way simulated conversation in which the speaker played the coach. I was asked to describe the worst-case scenario, that is, what would happen if this member of staff was unable to make the transition that I had described. I said that ultimately it would mean a change of job, or a change of organisation. My part done; I was invited by the speaker to return to my seat in the audience. The speaker went on to coach the team member. She probed the reasons for the team member's 'resistance' and challenged her reluctance to work with a coach.

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Following the simulation, I felt embarrassed, extremely uncomfortable, and a little angry.

Throughout the simulation, three things simultaneously vied for my attention as I tried to make sense of what was happening. First, I was concerned that those audience members who I did not know (or indeed did, as several of my colleagues were in attendance) would see my portrayal of the manager as an insight into my practice. However, I quickly rationalised that if this was the case, I could live with it. Second, I was uncomfortable with my and, to a lesser degree, the group's seeming acceptance of the necessity or indeed usefulness of inviting a coach/third party into this scenario, particularly as some form of mediator between manager and team member. And third, I was a little angry that I and the group, again to a lesser extent, had tacitly agreed to the labelling of the team member as 'resistant to change' and her reluctance to work with a coach as something pathological that needed to be cured. However, as I did not want to be discourteous to the speaker, a guest invited by a colleague who I also did not want to risk embarrassing, I stayed silent. Indeed, in keeping with the theme of the event, I colluded when I could have challenged. This (vivid moment of) experience (Shaw, 2010) is a useful example of how unexpectedly brushing up against another's praxis immediately leaves you confronted with your own. Suze Wilson argues:

> If 'leadership' is constituted as nothing more than a project of rendering the self more perfect so as to enable career advancement, shaping the self in ways that align to whatever approach or style constitutes the latest leadership fad, then something so self-absorbed in its focus likely offers little in terms of advancing collective well-being.
>
> *Wilson et al. (2018)*

The replacement of the word 'leadership' with 'coaching', in the quotation above, would be a fair description of what in my experience has become the prevailing approach to coaching taken on conventional leadership development programmes. In this chapter, I compare this stance with the complexity approach to coaching that my colleagues and I have been taking. I also reflect on the use and usefulness of psychometric tools in general and 360° feedback questionnaires in particular and proffer a radically different perspective on power.

Coaching (and mentoring): A brief history

Garvey *et al*. provide a brief and useful history of mentoring and coaching in the second edition of their book, *Coaching and Mentoring: Theory and Practice* (2014). They argue that the 'use of [the] words "coaching" and "mentoring" [has] subtly altered over time to become more or less interchangeable' (ibid.: 11). They concur that references to mentoring can be found in the writings of Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, and Homer and go on to track how this concept was picked up

by Fenelon and Caraccioli in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France and built on by Honoria in three volumes (volumes 1 and 2 appeared in 1793 and volume 3 in 1796) of *The Female Mentor* (ibid.: 14–19).

However, the authors are less convinced that the term 'coaching' might similarly be traced back to Ancient Greece and Socratic dialogue (de Haan, 2008) arguing that such claims are 'speculative and associative' (Garvey *et al*., 2014: 19). They contend that the first actual reference to coaching appears in Thomas Thackeray's novel *Pendennis*, published in 1849, where the term is used to describe the mechanism offered to university students to support 'academic attainment' (ibid.: 21). By 1867, the scope had broadened to include the development of boating and rowing skills (ibid.). Garvey *et al*. argue that in the early accounts of mentoring, the purpose is 'to assist the learner to integrate as a fully functioning person within the society they inhabit'; whereas the purpose of coaching, as depicted in early writings, is to 'improve performance and attainment' (ibid.: 24). The one thing that descriptions of each process have in common is that both the coach and the mentor are identified as being 'skilled, more experienced or more knowledgeable person[s]' (ibid.: 24–27). They conclude that the differentiation between coach and mentor that was once clear has become blurred over time to the point where 'coaching and mentoring are essentially similar in nature' (ibid.: 32).

The three leadership development texts most frequently tagged as 'essential reading' for UK business school programmes are written by Dalton (2010), Gold *et al.* (2010), and Carmichael *et al.* (2011). As outlined in the Introduction, textbooks often sacrifice depth for breadth. Carmichael *et al*. dedicate just three pages of their almost 400-page book to the subject of coaching. They draw on several sources, including the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, to note that the use of coaching in organisations spans the spectrum of performance improvement, through dealing with personal challenges, to helping people adjust psychologically to changes they might be experiencing (ibid.: 228–230). Dalton dedicates five pages of his 500-page book to coaching, mentoring, counselling, and sponsoring. He also sees coaching, mentoring, and counselling overlapping along a spectrum, with coaching ('senior person, usually with authority, helps a junior person become more effective') at one end, mentoring ('an experienced person providing guidance, encouragement, feedback and support to a learner') in the middle, and counselling ('where the mentor … becomes heavily involved in the identity, self-esteem and personal growth issues of the protegé') at the other end (2010: 206–211). Gold *et al*. (2010: 235–255) invest some 20 pages of the available 400 in the discussion of coaching and mentoring. This includes a substantial section exploring how to 'develop a culture that supports coaching' across an organisation. They argue that it is important to distinguish coaching, which they define as a guided activity aimed at solving a problem, from counselling and therapy (ibid.: 237).

Simon Western argues that coaching in organisations emerged from career counselling and employee assistance programmes and focused on 'the wounded self', that is, 'the employee who was broken, stressed and underperforming' (2012: 5).

However, he contends that its popularity only really grew when coaching went 'beyond the healing of a "wounded self"' to offer 'positive and action oriented interventions' that focused on the 'celebrated self' as promoted by 'positive psychology and the happiness industry' (ibid.). This new focus promised 'change, transformation, self-discovery, higher productivity [and] improved performance in work … and in life more generally' (ibid.).

The traditional use of coaching on leadership development programmes involves the participants working directly with a coach to identify and support their personal development. In other words, the coach will work with the coachee to identify the gap between where he or she is now and where he or she wants (or others think he or she ought) to be, generate options to close the gap, and then devise an action plan to (supposedly) make this happen. The framework that is most often used to describe this process on conventional leadership development programmes is John Whitmore's (2002) GROW (goal, reality, options, what next/now/will you do?) model. The GROW model is referenced by both Gold *et al*. (2010) and Carmichael *et al*. (2011) in their discussions of coaching, with Gold *et al.* arguing that 'this view of coaching is so well known and popular that it is churlish to even attempt to provide criticism' (2010: 241). This is quite a telling comment!

One of the main reasons why I felt compelled to write this book is to challenge the unthinking acceptance of the mainstream discourse that pervades conventional textbooks, leadership development programmes, and business school curricula alike. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with coaching models, frameworks, and perspectives like GROW (Whitmore, 2002). They have their place and can be useful in helping a coachee to identify and develop the technical capabilities required for his or her role. However, working in this way can also become highly abstract, with the coach and coachee caught up in individualistic fantasies of how things *ought to be* (Act 4 of Rodgers' 'Management in Five Acts', see Chapter 3), leading to the type of self-absorbed view of leadership that Wilson *et al*. (2018) caution against in the quotation that opens this chapter. The approach to coaching that my colleagues and I have been taking is to support leader-managers to develop an awareness of self in and with (direct and indirect) relation to others (the interdependent, social patterns of interaction that we find ourselves caught up in) with a view to enhancing the capacities of sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement required to work with *what is* (Rodgers's Act 1 – see Chapter 3).

Coaching (and mentoring) at UH: A brief history

Leading Through Coaching (LTC) is a leadership development programme that was introduced at UH about five years ago. It began life as a response to requests from MSOL alumni for a follow-up programme. This initially led to Responding to the Challenges of Leading (RCL), a programme consisting of four half-day sessions held four times a year, at which half of each session was spent as a whole group (Community Meeting) and the other half working in pairs in partnered

conversation. The focus on conversation and relationship revived my interest in a discipline that takes conversation and relationship seriously, namely, coaching. I began looking for colleagues at the university who were involved in coaching and found Sally Graham. Sally was studying for a Masters in Executive Coaching at Ashridge Business School and the relational approach that Ashridge take was of interest to me, not least because it draws on the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating and group analysis – perspectives/methodologies that had become very important to me in my practice.

I asked Sally to pull something together for the participants on RCL, as an opportunity to engage with the discipline of coaching as a means of enhancing their capacities as leader managers for conversation and relationship. That is, something that would support leader-managers to develop their awareness of self in relation to/with others and to develop the capability to open up conversations in both one-to-one and group situations. LTC was the result. On the programme, participants do coach each other, but not with a view to fixing the coachee or improving his or her performance per se, rather with a view to supporting them to (i) make sense of the contexts in which they find themselves; (ii) take a reflexive look at the thinking that is sustaining the way things are; and (iii) exercise practical judgement in articulating a next step that might resonate with those involved. At this point, we had no thoughts or grand plan as to where this might lead beyond helping the participants with whom I was working to explore conversation and relationship in depth.

Of course, once you invite others into the conversation, all involved are influenced by, whilst they are simultaneously influencing, each other as well as influencing and being influenced by what then transpires. The ongoing interplay of intentions of all involved (me, Sally, the colleagues she invited to support her with LTC, the programme participants, the managers and senior managers with whom we had to negotiate the necessary time and budget) contributed to emergence of an accredited programme where participants would agree to coach/mentor colleagues on MSOL and, on graduation, become part of a pool of coaches available to anyone in the organisation who voluntarily requests such support. The programme is aimed at people who manage/lead others. Colleagues who are more interested in becoming coaches are directed to the coaching programmes/qualifications offered by the business school. We set out to enhance the capacity of LTC participants to become adept at rubbing along with others and, by and large, this is what we have managed to do. However, it would be fair to say that the unintended consequences – building a cadre of managers who are able to act as coaches and opening up spaces for conversational approaches to leadership and organisation – have been a welcome bonus.

Since Sally retired, my colleagues (Helen and Jill) and I have run the programme and we continue to draw on coaching as a means of helping leader-managers to become adept at conversation and relationship and to understand and work with affect – their own and that of those they interact with. The capabilities that we are looking to develop on LTC – noticing, questioning, listening, summarising,

recognising the patterns of interaction we are caught up in, acknowledging emotions, living with uncertainty/anxiety, and having an awareness of psychodynamic/unconscious processes like projection, transference, and countertransference (Thornton, 2016) – support the enhancement of the capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement. And it is these capacities that we would encourage participants to utilise in order to answer the question, 'What, if anything, from the discipline of coaching is useful to your thinking/practice as a leader-manager?'

In his book, *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze*, Svend Brinkmann, Professor of Psychology at Aalborg University in Denmark, argues that coaching has become a 'key psychological tool in a culture that revolves around the self' (2017: 75). He takes issue with coaching that looks to convince the coachee that they can find the answer to all of life's problems within, arguing that frequently they can't. Brinkmann recommends sacking your coach and turning instead to the people we once looked to for such support – friends. He advises us to pursue interventions/activities/ways of thinking that 'discourage over-reliance on your inner self and encourage a more rounded world view' (ibid.: 14); a complexity approach to coaching/mentoring attempts to do just that. In contrast to most traditional leadership development programmes, taking a complexity approach means engaging with coaching as a means of developing an awareness of self in and with relation to others, not only as an end in itself but rather as an adjunct to developing the capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement.

Coaching as a form of work therapy

Stacey contends that coaching 'as a form of mentoring … could be a very important technique with regard to the exercise of practical judgement' (2012: 7). He makes a distinction between the 'instrumentally rational, step-following forms of coaching' and 'more discursive and exploratory forms … understood as a kind of work therapy' (ibid.). Cox (2010) compares the differences between coaching and therapy across four dimensions: objective, level of interpretation, depth of relationship, and time limit. Table 4.1 is my rather reductive and polarised depiction of Cox's more nuanced discussion (see Cox, 2010: 160–163), but I have found this to be a useful way of helping managers on LTC to acquaint themselves with the philosophy of the programme and the complexity approach to coaching/conversation.

TABLE 4.1 The difference between therapy and coaching

	Therapy	*Coaching*
Objective	Psychological change	Improved performance
Interpretation	High ('analytic')	Low (face value)
Relationship	Deep	Superficial
Time limit	Open	Fixed

Source: Adapted from Cox (2010).

TABLE 4.2 The difference between therapy, coaching as a form of work therapy and coaching

	Therapy	*Coaching as a form of work therapy*	*Coaching*
Objective	Psychological change	Negotiable	Improved performance
Interpretation	High ('analytic')	Negotiable	Low (face value)
Relationship	Deep	Negotiable	Superficial
Time limit	Open	Negotiable	Fixed

Source: Adapted from Cox (2010).

The approach to coaching taken on LTC lies somewhere between these two poles. Borrowing Stacey's concept of 'work therapy' (2012: 109), the amended table now looks something like this (see Table 4.2):

What I take from Stacey's notion of work therapy is not that he is advocating therapy in the workplace, rather he is suggesting that more discursive coaching conversations, that is, conversations that explore the complexities of day-to-day experience and the strong emotions and anxieties that are often provoked as we try to get things done together, are more useful than conversations based on idealistic (and unrealistic) expectations of how leaders and organisations ought to be. Stacey argues that the 'coach's work in the development of more fluid and complex conversation involves curbing the widespread pattern in organizations where leaders and managers focus on the future and move immediately to planning and solving problems' (2012: 109). Stacey advocates staying with the uncertainty a little longer, opening up the conversation rather than closing it down. This resonates with the experience I share in the narrative above where the speaker/coach paid little attention to the present or past, focusing instead on how the coach might support the coachee to embrace the future by accepting the new ways of working that the coachee is being forced to adopt.

The opportunity that the managers on LTC provide for their coachees (participants on MSOL and colleagues at the university) falls into the 'coaching as a form of work therapy' category. To use Western's (2012) terminology, coaching conversations will neither focus on the 'celebrated self' nor on the 'wounded self' but rather will accept that they cannot be split. This means that conversations might well be experienced as being therapeutic, but they are not therapy. Indeed, it is important for coaches to be able to identify when lines become blurred and to recommend that a coachee seek the professional help of a trained and qualified therapist. In describing the approach to coaching taken on LTC as a form of work therapy, the point that I am looking to make is that from a complexity perspective, the (i) objective; (ii) degree of analysis; (iii) quality of relationship; and even (iv) the timing of the coaching cannot be planned in advance, these things can only be negotiated, and iteratively calibrated, one conversation at a time. Both parties

then pay attention to what it is that they are doing together and are prepared to end the relationship should its continuation not be in the best interests of either party and/or develop beyond the psychological capability of the coach.

Stacey contends that a coach who 'follows rules and step-by-step procedures when working with leaders and managers is in fact using the tools and techniques of instrumental rationality' (2012: 109). He argues that this form of coaching might at best 'foster competence', but it will not help to 'develop proficiency and expertise' (ibid.). In using the terms competency, proficiency, and expertise, Stacey is drawing on Flyvbjerg (2001), who draws on the work of the Dreyfus brothers who created a five-phase model of development – novice, advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient performer, and expert (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). In one experiment, the brothers filmed six paramedics administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) (ibid.: Chapter 2). Five were trainees, and the sixth was a seasoned paramedic with a great deal of 'experience in life saving techniques' (ibid.: Chapter 1). The videos were then shown to groups of (i) experienced paramedics, (ii) trainee paramedics, and (iii) instructors. Each participant in the experiment was shown all six films before being asked which of the six paramedics they would choose to resuscitate them, if they needed CPR. Some 90 per cent of the experienced paramedics chose the experienced paramedic, while 50 per cent of the trainees also chose the experienced paramedic (ibid.: Chapter 2). However, the seasoned paramedic was only picked out by 30 per cent of the instructors.

If we think about what might be generalisable from this experiment, one might say that those instructors who did not choose the seasoned paramedic were looking for CPR to be done 'by the book' and may well have viewed the seasoned paramedic's exercise of practical judgement as 'sloppy' or 'unprofessional'. The experienced paramedic did not follow procedure in a step-by-step fashion; instead, they abandoned the rules to meet the needs of the patient. An interesting aside for me in this is the fact that the trainees identified the expert paramedic more consistently than did the instructors. Paramedics have access to an instruction manual on how to administer CPR; yet they often need to adapt to the individual and the circumstances that they find themselves in. In organisational settings, where there are no instruction manuals for the navigation of complex patterns of interaction, and the false hope afforded by conventional formulas and recipes are illusory, how many patients are we losing for the want of practical judgement?

Similarly, the implication for coaching is that models, like GROW, will only be useful up to a point. They can help new coaches to put a foot on the ground in terms of developing their proficiency as a coach but when it comes to developing expertise, they may constrain more than enable. To develop expertise, one may have to let go of models and frameworks and become comfortable working more discursively. In Stacey's opinion, 'coaches who work in a discursive way with groups of leaders and managers may help to widen and deepen communication in a group and so produce greater meaning'. And this, Stacey argues, 'cannot be reduced to rules and procedures' (2012: 109). This perspective chimes with the relational coaching

approach taken by Erik de Haan and colleagues at Ashridge Business School. De Haan is director of the Centre for Coaching at Ashridge and for him:

> In coaching, a number of different levels are present simultaneously. The focus is often not only on the technical or organisational issue raised, and on the ways of dealing with it, but also on the personal dynamic and emotional undercurrents at the root of such issues.
>
> *de Haan (2008: 9)*

De Haan argues that the 'professionalisation' and burgeoning research disciplines that have emerged around 'helping conversations' serve to amplify the impoverishment of modern workplaces where it is 'difficult … to conduct a conversation imbued with trust'. De Haan sees this as 'an indication of greater distance and coolness in interpersonal relationships' (ibid.: Preface). Mowles (2017) recognises the 'distrust of feelings' and the tendency to categorise overt displays of emotion in work settings as 'unprofessional'. Psychotherapist Susie Orbach is also struck by how often clients who have come to see her about personal issues end up focusing on 'work and the emotional and power relationships that exist there' (Orbach, 2008: 14). This often leaves them uneasy or irritated:

> It is as though despite work being really important, we shouldn't really get hot and bothered – or pleased and delighted – because work is not quite accepted as a legitimate site for what is considered emotionally important or valuable.
>
> *Ibid.: 14*

For Orbach, work is not just 'something that is emotionally, intellectually and economically sustaining'. It is 'self-expressive, a critical identity marker, a source of self-worth, and a place in which interesting and challenging dilemmas get posed and more often than not, addressed in creative and original ways' (ibid.), while simultaneously being an arena in which emotions run high and destructive processes find expression (ibid.: 17). She reflects that 'we are never going to avoid being affected by the people we work with …. They will influence, delight and disturb us …. So we need to know how to relate to that disturbance. We need to find a way of being curious about the uncomfortable aspects so that we are not immediately reactive in a negative manner' (ibid.: 16).

Although Orbach is writing from the perspective of somebody working in the helping professions, I contend that there are parallels for us as leader-managers, coaches, and human beings. Orbach argues that the ability to 'make yourself available' to the needs of another and to enter that space 'with curiosity and interest rather than with a compelling personal agenda of your own needs' requires 'a level of emotional literacy towards oneself in which something less instrumental, proscriptive and more open and curious can occur'[1] (2008: 15). This resonates with the complexity approach to coaching that we take on LTC. In the narrative that opens

this chapter, the speaker (as coach in the scenario) displays some of the thinking that Brinkmann cautions us to be wary of, that is, she implies that the coachee is the author of his or her own story – the trials as well as the triumphs. From this perspective, anyone finding themselves in a tight spot need not fret, as they have all the resources they need within them, and it is the coach's job to help them to access these hidden resources to turn the situation around. In short, whatever happens is your own fault, but don't worry because you also have everything you need to put it right. The speaker (as coach) treats me and the other participant (as manager and team member, respectively) as *autonomous* individuals. From the speaker's point of view, the team member's (reluctant coachee's) 'resistance to change' is a choice that he or she is autonomously and independently making.

Taking a complexity approach means acknowledging that the team member and manager are *interdependent* individuals. From this perspective, the team member's (reluctant coachee's) response to change is something that has emerged in the social processes of interaction that he or she is caught up in. Consequently, I would be interested to explore what is happening between the team member, manager, other team members, colleagues in other teams and departments, customers, suppliers, other organisations, etc. and to look at the influence this is having on the team member's conceptions and response to the changes that have been introduced. I would also be interested to explore why the manager feels impelled to invite a coach to work with his or her 'reluctant' team member rather than talking with and negotiating a way forward that both could live with (see Chapter 5).

This incident also raised for me the question of ethics. Working with a coachee to consciously or unconsciously have them comply with the wishes of their manager, with or without the coachee's consent, is a form of coercion. Don't get me wrong – as I argue in Chapter 3, coercion is a necessary and legitimate feature of organisational life, but we need to be aware that when we portray coaching as a neutral development opportunity, we obscure the ethical implications of what we are doing. Coaching might be a useful way of supporting someone through a transition, but the choice to have it should remain with the coachee. During the brief, whole group conversation that occurred after the simulation, themes of power, inclusion/exclusion, shame, and ethics were not explored. It seemed as though coaching was unreservedly accepted by the group as an activity for the good. There was little, if any, acknowledgement of the shadow side of coaching. As Stacey points out 'It is important … not to idealise mentors and coaches. Mentors and coaches may well relate to those they mentor and coach in ways that are self-satisfying, domineering and manipulative' (2012: 110).

Now I am not suggesting that offering coaching to somebody who is struggling to adapt to new ways of working is always 'self-satisfying, domineering and manipulative' but what I am arguing is that we should be alert to the fact that the meaning of such a gesture is not in the gift of the manager and/or the coach. The scenario above highlights the potential for coaching to become another form of coercive persuasion (Schein, 1961)/disciplinary power (Stacey, 2011).

The speaker/coach in the above scenario did not question the ethics of what she was being asked to do and neither did we, the audience of experienced and new coaches. It would take a lot of courage to refuse coaching in this situation. Many a prospective coachee might be reluctant to talk to an outsider – someone brought in by their superior – but with his or her job on the line, how likely is it that he or she will (be able to) say 'no'?

The themes arising in the narrative include the potential for (i) dissent, that is, the questioning of new working arrangements/structures/policies/procedures, to be regarded as 'resistance to change' and pathologised as something to be cured (in this instance with the help of a coach); (ii) coaching to be experienced by coachees as a form of coercive persuasion/disciplinary power; (iii) coaches, particularly when employed by third parties, to become the agents of said coercive persuasion/disciplinary power; (iv) coaching to become what Mead (1934) describes as a cult value, that is a social object (see Chapter 3) stripped of all constraint, an activity *for the good* that is difficult to criticise; and finally (v) accepting that all things (that happen to us) can be explained by and reduced to individual psychologies/agency. I'll pick up on each of these themes as the chapter progresses, but at this point, I want to take the opportunity to explore the conventional means through which the perspective of others is brought into the coaching process, and that is through the use of psychometrics.

Psychometrics

> In management development the overriding tendency has been to limit the interpretation of complex group phenomena to psychological processes …. Yet as Brown (1985) pointed out, 'it would be simple minded in the extreme to attribute the problems of race relations or worker-management relations to purely psychological processes'.
>
> *Reynolds and Trehan (2003: 166)*

> [T]he figurations of interdependent human beings – cannot be explained if one studies human beings singly.
>
> *Elias (1978: 72)*

On traditional leadership development programmes, psychometrics are used as a means of developing self-awareness in addition to self-reflection. If one takes a complexity approach to leadership development, an approach that understands leadership to be a social and relational phenomenon that is co-created in ongoing patterns of communicative interaction between people who are 'fundamentally interdependent' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 47), then the usefulness of most psychometric and personality profiling tools, based as they are on 'individual-centred psychologies' (ibid.), is immediately problematised. During 20 years spent working in leadership development roles, I have become accredited in a (large) number

of these tools[2] and as my collection of certificates increases, so my faith in the use and usefulness of such instruments decreases. It is neither my intention to critique each tool here nor my inclination to enter into any form of academic debate about the validity and/or reliability of these instruments, rather I want to share my experience of working with psychometric tools in general and to explore the use and usefulness of 360° (also known as multi-rater) feedback processes in particular.

In Chapter 3, I explored the function of abstract models and frameworks as rhetorical devices to (i) persuade; (ii) defend against the anxiety of not knowing (transitional objects); and (iii) discipline/correct. This goes some way to explaining my experience of psychometrics, in general, and 360° feedback, in particular, as a coachee/participant in coaching/leadership development programmes. Indeed, I contend that these instruments are more of a crutch for the coach/leadership developer as they are a useful resource for the coachee/participant. My experience of psychometrics as a participant on leadership development programmes echoes my experiences of them as a facilitator/coach. The majority of instruments that I have worked with, both as a facilitator/coach and as a participant on leadership development programmes, have been self-report. That is, participants are invited to complete a questionnaire containing questions such as 'what role do you take in …', 'how do you prefer to …', 'if given the choice between X and Y, what is your preference?' The resulting report then plays back what one's answers signify in relation to the framework or model that one has been invited to compare oneself with/to.

Depending on the tool, the resulting report usually provides some form of shorthand summary in the form of a set of letters, a range of colours, a role preference or two, a thumbnail sketch of one's work self, leadership style, etc. All reports come with a set of caveats and instructions on how to make the most of the information contained therein, but in my experience, these get superseded by the following 'howevers':

1 However often the facilitator/coach cautions participants not to pigeonhole or reduce people to the said letters, colours, reductive profiles that the answers to the questions have produced in the report, they do.
2 However often the facilitator/consultant cautions participants not to second-guess where their managers/team members/colleagues might figure in relation to the framework (given the fact that we do not have access to their profiles), they do.
3 However often the facilitator/coach cautions people not to get too bogged down in conversations about validity and/or reliability and/or the rigour of the research method(s) used in the development of the tool, they do.
4 However often *this* coach/facilitator cautioned himself not to become embroiled in conversations in which he ended up having to defend a tool that he himself considered dubious, he all too often did.

360° feedback

> [I]dentity has also come to be an important element of control in organizations; many types of activity in today's organizations can be seen as attempts to control and regulate ideas and views about who we are and what we can do, such as cultural change programmes, feedback on management and leadership, leadership development, coaching and ideas about authentic leadership.
>
> *Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016)*

One of the psychometric tools that looks to triangulate one's self-perceptions with the perceptions of others is the 360° or multi-rater feedback questionnaire.[3] These questionnaires are usually based on some form of bespoke or generic competency/values framework or model of leadership. Raters/respondents include the participant, their line manager(s), direct reports, peers and, in some cases, external contacts, e.g., customers and suppliers (processes involving these wider groups are sometimes referred to as 540° feedback). All are asked to complete a questionnaire that rates the participant against the relevant competencies/values or leadership traits. The ratings are usually a mix of quantitative/tick box – on a scale of 1–5 'how frequently' or 'how effectively' does X? – and qualitative/free text – 'what does this person do well?' and/or 'what are this person's areas for development?'

The resultant reports group raters into the categories identified above – participant, line manager(s), direct reports, peers, and (where applicable) external contacts – thus providing anonymity to all bar the participant's line manager. The three most frequent criticisms levelled at multi-rater tools are as follows:

i Negative feedback has a negative impact on performance (Kluger and De Nisi, 1996).
ii 360° tools can 'reinforce a climate of mistrust' (Dalton, 2010: 126).
iii In one study, after nine months, managers were only able to 'recall strengths' (Gold *et al*., 2010: 105).

From my own experience, 360° feedback processes exhibit four shortcomings.

First, as Reynolds and Trehan (2003); Brown (1985) and Stacey and Mowles (2016) point out above, 360° feedback questionnaires are based on an understanding of leadership as something that can be reduced to individual behaviours and/or agency. Second, even if leadership was something located in an individual, the qualities and traits identified in 360° feedback surveys are all too often based on the archetype of the tough, white, heterosexual male, leaving little space for anybody who does not fit this picture (Sinclair, 2005). This not only discourages the diversity that most organisations would say they seek but also potentially feeds the unconscious (and/or conscious) bias of the subject and raters. Third, during the coaching conversations that I have been involved in, as both coach and coachee, the most closely scrutinised element of 360° reports, the element that catalyses

most of the discussion, is the free text section in which raters can provide more nuanced, detailed, and discursive feedback. And this goes some way to explaining why, fourth, most of my development colleagues (even those working from mainstream conceptions of leadership and organisation) view most psychometric tools and 360° feedback instruments as little more than 'dialogue openers'.

I do not deny that many participants on the leadership development programmes that I have been involved in have found the coaching conversations generated by 360° feedback useful, but I contend this has more to do with the opportunity to reflect upon their own thinking/practice, catalysed by the qualitative (rater comments) rather than the quantitative data. This begs the question: is there a more useful way of opening dialogue? As a dialogue opener for this discussion, I want to share a vignette from a colleague who is taking a complexity approach in his practice. Eric Wenzel works as a management consultant, focusing on change management and leadership development, top executive coaching, and assessments for senior executives. He heads the Management Diagnostics practice for the German-speaking territories in a global company advising on both people and organisations. The following narrative is taken from Eric's doctoral thesis, which is available online (Wenzel, 2011). At the time of writing, Eric was working for a company that develops and markets 360° profiling tools.

> Leadership programmes at my current employer are largely based on multi-rater feedback tools, the results of which are explained to larger groups of feedback receivers over the course of two-day seminars. The seminars are followed up by team meetings in which leaders must share their feedback with their team (the feedback givers) and discuss points for improvement of their leadership skills. Usually the discussion around the results is highly constrained by alluding to a specific set of leadership behaviours which are pre-defined and that are said to influence a team's experienced working conditions significantly. Either aspect, the leader's behavioural repertoire and the working conditions are analysed by the use of various 180° feedback instruments. The experienced working conditions the leader is said to influence to a large degree. It consists of several dimensions which address different areas of people's experience at work such as clarity about the company's vision, standards of excellence, or experienced commitment of one's team. The idea is to show very clearly to leaders those conditions in need of improvement and how to bring about the improvement by modifying their leadership and using the 180° graphs as points of reference. I have found myself quickly abandoning the graphs that show a leader's results in team meetings which, however, I am told are supposed to clearly guide those meetings. This is mainly so because I found throughout the first team meetings I facilitated that clinging to these graphs effectively serves to close conversations down.

In participating in the discussions in very different ways from other colleagues, clients and I find ways to address issues such as team identity, issues of power relating, or the experiences of mutual (mis)recognition, none of which are captured through our feedback instruments. These aspects of work seem to trouble people quite substantially, however. It is usually believed that mastering the discourse around leadership as it is propagated with these tools takes a while, so it is most surprising for colleagues that literally every manager in the programmes I initially participated in has asked me to come back to continue the work with him or her and their teams beyond the assignment I was originally contracted for while none of my colleagues have been asked to do so. While colleagues believe that this is because I have become a master of our tools, the opposite is actually the case. For instance, a recent team meeting I facilitated was quite a shocking experience for the vice president who is the head of a group of directors. As part of her feedback, she had also received anonymised verbatim comments, one of which was fairly critical of her leadership ability. Quite contrary to her intuition, it turned out in the team meeting that her deputy had made the critical comments, and as she told me later, she had been on the verge of terminating the team meeting when this became clear.

Instead of advising the Vice president (VP) on how to make clear to her deputy that he had failed to live up to her expectations and removing him from his present role as a consequence, I responded to this situation quite differently, and I would consider this to be related to my shifting attitude towards my work. In drawing attention away from the deputy and pointing the VP to her own intense response, our discussion began to gravitate towards her own naiveté and what this meant for the views about other team members she took for granted and about herself. Instead of closing the conversation down by giving clear advice on what to do, I encouraged the VP to explore further her contribution to this situation and to take into account the social complexities this incident revealed. At some point, she even began to recognise the deputy's contribution as a highly courageous act, possibly conveying the most important feedback for her in this whole exercise. I pointed out that in daring to explore the difference he brought to the table, she had become able to tender provisionally her view of her deputy and found a way to complexify her interpretation of the situation, resulting in a more reality-congruent understanding than her initial view might have suggested. She was so surprised by this form of consultancy that she hired me for a team retreat later in the year right away.

[T]he above example seems to be indicative of what this means for my consulting practice. In opening up and exploring further the beliefs we take for granted, the client and I became able to discover a more complex understanding of what had been going on and, importantly, what this meant for the VP's next steps for the future cooperation with her deputy.

Eric's explication of practice is a useful illustration of the difference between a complexity approach to coaching/360°, in which the coach is interested in supporting the coachee to develop an awareness of the social, that is, an awareness of self and others in relation to and with self and others, and the conventional approach, whereby the coach's preoccupation is with developing the coachee's self-awareness, that is, awareness of self and how others might see him or her. For Elias, *self* is the singular and *social* is the plural of *interdependent people* (Stacey in MacIntosh *et al.*, 2006). They cannot be separated. I find 360° feedback tools that look to separate the behaviours of individuals from the social processes in which they emerge unhelpful. This is not to say that we are not responsible for our individual actions and behaviours, rather that they cannot be reduced to individual psychologies. Any explanation of what we find ourselves doing needs to take account of the social interactions in which our actions emerge and the history of social interactions that continue to influence our thinking/practice as we act in the present in anticipation of the future. Coaching is at its most useful when it helps the coach and coachee to develop a more reality congruent understanding of the patterns of power relations they are caught up in.

Eric's rejoinder, a reflection on his current thinking.

Years after the case described above, a colleague, Marcus and I were asked to facilitate a number of team development sessions for the local board of a country organisation that was part of a globally operating corporate. The group of senior executives had been formed through a merger where the global corporate had taken over the operations of their largest competitor in that local market. The board comprised people from both organisations. I was part of the team which helped with selecting board members as I had led a project to assess the top 100 leadership population of the two organisations. As part of the assessment process, 180° feedbacks had been obtained from all group members to determine their leadership effectiveness.

Despite the fact that through the merger, the local organisation was in a strong market position the business did not evolve in the way people at the global headquarters expected it. This was somewhat surprising since an aggregate report which was based on the 180° feedback reports of each board member had revealed that this was a group of highly effective leaders. Something else seemed to be at stake.

A couple of days ahead of the second session with the board, Marcus set up a preparation call for the two of us. He also invited two younger consultants who came prepared to take notes and work out a slide deck that Marcus thought we would need; the aggregate 180° feedback report should be at the heart of the presentation. Everyone seemed rather surprised when I said that I would prefer not to work with the feedback results.

They were flabbergasted when I went on to suggest that we should not work out a slide deck either.

I presumed that the leadership feedback report might rather distract the group from attending to those aspects that seemed to matter more; after all our report apparently had little to offer to explain the business situation. Marcus did not insist that we work out a deck and so we met for the session equipped with a pen and a piece of paper. The conversation emerged quite naturally until someone mentioned that a recent engagement survey had revealed that the HR function suffered from the worst engagement scores of the entire country organisation. It turned out that the CEO had had discussions on that matter previously with Carolina, the board member, who was responsible for HR.

Nevertheless, and quite different from his usual style, he was very clear in his statements making it plain to Carolina that everyone knew that this situation had to be resolved. After all, he saw HR to be key to create a positive outlook for the entire organisation, something he found rather hard to do when HR colleagues were disengaged. Carolina was so shocked that she burst into tears and left the room. The CEO was not defensive, but repeated for the group that the matter was serious, emphasising that he had offered Carolina his support on several occasions, but nothing had happened. The situation was made even more complex through the fact that Carolina had been assigned an additional role. On top of her responsibilities for HR, a role which she had held previously in one of the merged companies, she was now also tasked with leading another function. She felt overwhelmed and unable to meet both the needs of a dwindling business and those of a disengaged HR team. It was time to break for lunch, and Marcus approached me, wondering what we should be doing now and how to carry on after lunch. I suggested that we ask the group once we would have reconvened.

After lunch the CEO apologised for having come across as possibly rude. He also revealed that he felt personally responsible for the status quo of the HR team but without clarifying in which way exactly he felt that responsibility. Carolina responded to that gesture positively and it turned out that she felt committed to do both her jobs well.

Nonetheless, she was on a fence and felt guilty as she had decided to spend more time on her second, non-HR role. She clearly believed that she had failed the HR team, a group of people she felt closely related to after all her years as Head of HR. I mentioned that her strong commitment was obvious to everyone, and others nodded. These non-verbal cues appeared to be relieving. I felt encouraged to say that people in this room seemed to be of the opinion that the HR team was at the core of a successful integration, but through that created somehow the sensation for the HR team that they bore the burden for organisational success alone, causing feelings of

incompetence and inadequacy and effectively scapegoating the team. The HR team seemed to project their strong emotions onto their leader, Carolina, emotions she was now expressing for the group in our session. This interpretation seemed to strike a chord with others, and the CEO mentioned that he had never thought about intra-organisational dynamics that way but found it helpful to do it now.

If I rethink my practice as an OD consultant and compare it with my approach described in the vignette from four years ago, I find that I have increasingly steered clear of working with (feedback) tools even though I feel obliged to use them occasionally when clients desire a more formalistic approach, or when I work alongside a larger team of consultants. In this case, the CEO was open to trying out an agenda-free approach to explore organisational dynamics differently as there appeared to be no obvious reason for the organisation's poor performance.

The main reason why I personally have grown more comfortable with taking a conversational approach when working with top teams is through the responses that such approach calls out from people. Finding the words and the courage to talk about aspects of their work that usually remain unaddressed seems to spur the ability of groups to work together more productively over time. I also feel comfortable to work in this way because I have repeatedly found that abstract tools and reports seem to make it virtually impossible to become aware of and work with those micro-gestures, or subtle emotional cues that are so often indicative of those aspects a group needs to attend to or tends to avoid.

Power

When power is dealt with at all in mainstream literature, it is usually portrayed as something that one person or group of people has and another person or group of people has not. In Gold *et al*., the discussion of power is reduced to an acknowledgement that in 'formal strategy-making activities, there are always likely to be certain voices that are more privileged and that dominate' (2010: 52). In the paragraph that Carmichael *et al*. invest in its exploration, power is described as a 'position' and as something that leaders can use at their discretion to impose their will and ideas on others or otherwise share (2011: 23). Dalton offers a more nuanced, albeit no less brief, view of power but in relation to organisational development (OD) activities. He cautions OD practitioners to 'recognise the pluralistic power games of organisations and play them skilfully' (2010: 407).

Stuart Lukes' (1974, 2005) understanding of power is representative of explanations found in the mainstream literature. Lukes views power as 'an ability or capacity of an agent or agents, which they may or may not exercise' (2005: 63). That is, power is something that an individual or a group possesses, and then can choose to

wield, or not, at will. This understanding of power implies that those with power can simply command those without power to do their bidding. From the perspective of complex responsive processes, drawing on the work of Elias, power is an 'integral element of all human relations', and 'whether power differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is a functional interdependence between people' (1978: 74). Elias sees power as a structural process, not a reified 'it':

> We say that a person possesses great power, as if power were a thing he carried about in his pocket. The use of the word is a relic of magico-mythical ideas. Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another, it is a structural characteristic of human relationships – all human relationships.
>
> *Ibid.: 70*

Elias uses game models to explore power relations, starting with simple 'two person games' through to more complex 'multi-person games on several levels' (1978.: 76–80). In a two-person, one-to-one relationship, if my perception is that I need you more than you need me (for love, money, status, etc. [ibid.: 88]), then the power differential is in your favour. If you perceive that you need me more than I need you, then the power differential is in my favour. However, although the asymmetry might be great, it will never be 100:0 (even in the relationship between master and slave, the master needs the slave to accept that he or she is a slave even if this can only be achieved through the threat of violence or death), nor will it ever be 50:50. Additionally, relations of power (the differential ratios) are dynamic and the balance of power can shift and switch. Think junior team member being appointed manager, or financially dependent partner winning the lottery. This description of power as a dynamic process of enabling and constraining, of simultaneously cooperating while holding each other to account (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 402), is a radically different view of power than that found in the mainstream literature. As outlined in Chapter 3, as human beings we are interdependent; we cannot simply do what we want, and this is one of the reasons why conceptions of leader-managers as all-powerful individuals are as unhelpful as they are unrealistic.

Elias argues that there are circumstances in which the simple two-person game model might be applied – the 'relationship between a specialist and non-specialist … or a famous painter and patron', for example (1978: 90) – but in reality we are all involved in 'multi-person games on several levels' and this goes some way to explaining why the games that we are caught up in take 'a course *which none of the individual players has planned, determined or anticipated*' and why 'as power differentials lessen between interdependent individuals and groups there is a diminishing possibility that any participants, whether on their own or as groups, will be able to control the overall course of the game' (ibid.: 91; emphasis in the original).

However, it is possible to increase one's influence on the game by becoming more detached in one's involvement and paying attention to the 'dynamics' one is

caught up in with a view to anticipating the patterns (next moves) that are emerging in the interplay of everyone's intentions. Becoming more detached in one's involvement and becoming adept at navigating the politics (games) of organisational life is explored more fully in Chapter 6. For the purposes of this chapter, it is worth noting that becoming more detached in one's involvement is not the same as stepping outside of the game. You can never become fully detached; one is influencing while simultaneously being influenced by the game. That is, we are played by the game in the playing of it.

Similarly, to draw attention to the game, particularly those aspects that one might find unjust or absurd, let alone illegal, immoral, or likely to injure someone, is to risk exclusion. And this points to another aspect of power that is underexplored in mainstream literature. Stacey and Mowles, after Elias and Scotson (1994), argue that 'power differences establish groupings in which some people are "included", and others are excluded. Power is thus felt as the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 406). Inclusion in the grouping called 'managers', for example, automatically leads to one's exclusion from the grouping called 'workers'. I recall a programme participant sharing with the group his very visceral experience of this phenomenon. After successfully applying for an internal promotion, which meant that he would now be managing his former peers, a colleague he had worked alongside for many years took him to one side and said, 'you do realise that this means we can't be friends anymore?' This initial reaction, provoked by the anxiety and uncertainty over what it might mean for their relationship, probably tempered over time, but the point is that the actual/perceived shift in the power differential was something that neither party had intended/anticipated. If one accepts that power is a structural characteristic of all human relationships (Elias, 1978), then one cannot choose to use or not 'wield' power, as Lukes (2005) suggests, the power differential will have an impact on our interactions with others whether we want it to or not, whether we like it or not.

This has important implications for us as leader-managers, particularly in relation to coaching.

Authority is usually, but not always, sufficient to tip the power differential in our favour. Wilson *et al*. argue that from the 'early 1960s onwards, "authority" in its various guises has generally been in decline', while 'elite challenging activities have been rising' (Inglehart, 1977: 3; see also Gitlin, 1993; Wilson *et al*., 2018: 36). This means that leaders now must work hard(er) to gain followers' 'compliance and support' (ibid.). However, they also acknowledge that this general trend is 'attenuated in many workplaces' where 'the authority of manager-leaders to hire and fire typically remains intact' and 'highly potent in many cases' (ibid.: 38). This asymmetry in power ratios constrains how open we might be about our 'weaknesses' or 'areas for development' in coaching conversations with line managers who have a material influence on our job opportunities and/or future career aspirations.

The talking up of leadership (Khurana, 2007; Blom and Alvesson, 2015 – see Chapters 1 and 2, respectively) in mainstream and popular management literature has contributed to the illusion/delusion that C/EOs are all-powerful individuals/

groups who control corporate futures. An unthinking acceptance of this can lead to an unhealthy level of deference being expected and/or paid to those in positions of authority/seniority. For Stacey (2012), it is important for leader-managers to disavow their colleagues of the dependency that such an idealisation encourages, not least because when 'the idealisation and dependency inevitably fail … denigration and aggression' are sure to follow (2012: 114). Of course, as Stacey and Mowles also point out, acceptance that executive leaders do not control what happens in organisations also calls into the question 'the hugely inflated salaries that many leaders claim' (2016: 515).

As outlined in the Introduction, I do not have the same emancipatory intent as CMS scholars.

I do not anticipate a major recalibration of senior management remuneration during my lifetime; there are too many vested interests and current salaries inevitably attract the type of people who would fight to maintain the status quo. No, I am not interested in curbing the excesses of the megalomaniacal few (Tourish, 2013), but rather I am looking to prevent the *moderate many* from being seduced by deference into believing that they are, after all, something special and/or should be treated differently than the rest. De Haan and Kasozi observe that 'the risk of overdrive or hubris is particularly great in modern organisations. In these complex, fragmented and global settings, talented individuals may be elevated to leadership positions which nourish, reward and exploit strengths and at the same time fuel particular hubristic processes. Placed in those situations they might conclude, I must be a really exceptional talent because this big, powerful organization is recognizing my contribution and propelling me into ever more senior ranks' (2014: 20).

De Haan and Kasozi define hubris as 'a sense of overbearing pride, defiance or presumption not justified by the circumstances or the perceptions of others' (2014: 20). Aaron James describes those who refuse 'to listen to … legitimate complaints' and challenge the idea 'that we are each to be recognized as moral equals' as assholes (James, 2014: 1). In his book *Assholes: A Theory*, James goes on to define an asshole as a person who 'systematically allows himself to enjoy special advantages in interpersonal relations out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunises him against the complaints of other people' (ibid.: 4).

I'm not sure what the equivalent term would be in the UK, but whatever word one chooses, I think it is important to maintain the profane. This provides the required jolt to catalyse reflexivity. James contends that we all play a part in creating the conditions in which assholes thrive arguing that the 'asshole in power is shaped by his position and its culture as much as shapes it. Much as with our ordinary asshole boss, assholes may wind up in power, not simply because assholes are prone to seek it out but because the position induces a creeping sense of entitlement in those who come to occupy the role' (2014: 51). James argues that a sense of entitlement deadens 'one's capacities for empathy and understanding' and contends that the corporate asshole's damaging behaviours can outstrip those of the corporate psychopath (ibid.: 53).

Echoing Khurana (2007), James argues that a lack of stewardship demarcates corporate assholes from the rest as they take their responsibility to maximise shareholder value to the extreme. They make it their '*duty* to *minimize* benefits, overall, to consumers and workers' by offering 'the bare minimum incentive to get them to buy a product or show up to work' (2014: 55; emphasis in original). I caution the managers with whom I work to guard against becoming assholes. And I would caution readers to do the same. Furthermore, if you already have the asshole's sense of entitlement, or know that you will effortlessly acquire it should you attain a position of authority, then do everyone a favour, resign, and/or stay away from those roles that put you in charge of other people. Should you rise to the dizzy heights of CEO, or already find yourself there, then enjoy the trappings and the pomp and ceremony that accompany such roles (such traditions have a symbolic significance that it is important to maintain) but always remember:

- You are not Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, or Mahatma Ghandi. Indeed, were they still living, I contend that they would not recognise the inflated, individualistic, and idealistic narratives used to describe their practice/experience.
- You didn't (in most cases) create the organisation that you now find yourself in charge of, it is not your own personal fiefdom to do with what you will. The decisions you make will not only affect the lives of the people you work with, but they will also have an influence on the well-being of their families and friends and the communities in which you operate.
- The fact that the business you work for makes enormous profits doesn't mean that you are entitled to an inordinately bigger share of the pot than every other employee who has contributed to this success.
- Leave the business in as good (or better) a state than the one in which you found it.
- You are jointly responsible for the triple bottom line – people, planet, and profits.
- Don't believe the hype, especially your own (a coach might help with this).

De Haan and Kasozi (2014) argue that coaching might help leaders to avoid the 'shadow side of leadership' which they describe as the negative effects of hubris, derailment, and overdrive.

They contend:

> The best place for a leader to grow compassion and to address the excesses of hubris and relational overdrive is in a tailor-made, confidential and personal relationship, such as can be established in the privacy of executive coaching. By working in such a personal one-to-one helping relationship other relationships can be brought under scrutiny, and overdrive and derailment patterns can be observed and explored in depth.
>
> *Ibid.: 269*

Orbach argues that 'people at the top are pulling enormous salaries and … if their performance gets overloaded by stress, then it is very expensive to buy them out of their contracts and much cheaper to provide some kind of therapeutic help with the aim to bring them back to peak condition' (2008: 17). De Vries *et al*. argue that 'across all industries and at all organisational levels, executives are turning to coaches for support, advice and feedback' (2007: xxiv). Feedback often generated by the qualitative data from 360° feedback processes. As outlined above, from a complexity perspective, 360° feedback processes have four main shortcomings: (i) they reduce discussions of leadership to individual behaviours and/or agency; (ii) the frameworks used are all too often based on the archetype of the tough, white, heterosexual male; (iii) the quantitative data is too abstract to be of use and this means that (iv) the glossy reports produced are often regarded by coaches as little more than 'dialogue openers'. So, how might we have discursive conversations that keep sight of the social and relational (interdependent) nature of leadership without having to navigate our way through abstract frameworks replete with unhelpful archetypes?

Binney *et al*. have developed a 360° feedback process that does not use any form of quantitative competency-based framework. Instead, they ask just four open questions:

What's most important in X's leadership role?
What do you value most about X?
What would you like him/her to do more of or less of?
Looking at the future roles X may have, in what ways do you think he/she needs to develop?

2012: 264

I suggest that the questions might be even more useful if they did not mention leadership at all. Questions 1 and 4 have the potential to generate answers that simply reflect the habitus, whereby raters will replay mainstream, individualistic, and idealistic conceptions of leadership that legitimise and perpetuate archetypes that taking a complexity approach problematises. If one is going to use 360° feedback at all, then a more useful set of questions might be as follows:

1 What does this person do that is most useful to you and the team?
2 What does this person do that is least useful you and the team?
3 What, if anything, would you like this person to do differently?

Taking this a step further, on MSOL and LTC, we support leader-managers to become more adept at conversation and relationship with a view to opening up the possibility of superseding the need for anonymous feedback with an open discussion once or twice a year convened by the leader-manager themselves without a facilitator/coach. The questions might then be focused on how

the group/team is working and what, if any, contribution the leader-manager is making to this:

1 What works well in this group and what, if anything, does X contribute to this?
2 What doesn't work so well and what, if anything, does X contribute to this?
3 What, if anything, might we do differently?

Working in this way, might reduce the need to employ any form of psychometric/profiling tool as a catalyst for conversation.

Reflections

> Is coaching being used as a tool to sustain an ever problematic and dysfunctional system that requires re-thinking rather than sustaining? Or alternatively is coaching providing a vital reflective space in which individuals can be more humane, thoughtful, creative and strategic at work, a space where critical perspectives are allowed to be aired, where questioning and creativity are encouraged, in order to find innovative ways of moving forward?
>
> *Western (2012: 26)*

I think it would be fair say that my colleagues and I have been working with coaching as a means of encouraging the latter rather than sustaining the former. Initially, I/we engaged with the discipline/tools and techniques of coaching as a means of enhancing the capacities of the participants on leadership development programmes to engage in conversation and relationships more adeptly while supporting each other in the partnered conversations plenary sessions. The conceptualisation of a complexity approach to coaching as a form of 'work therapy' (after Stacey, 2012) emerged in the writing of this book, catalysed by the vivid moment of experience shared in the narrative at the beginning of this chapter, and tested since with successive cohorts of participants on LTC. It is a proverbial 'work in progress', but for me, it differentiates the complexity approach to coaching from the instrumental and performative approaches that populate mainstream literature. From a complexity perspective, coaching is viewed as a 'vital reflective space' that acknowledges that we are interdependent human beings caught up in patterns of local interaction (games) that we can influence but not control. In the interplay of everyone's intentions, what emerges is paradoxically certain and uncertain, predictable and unpredictable, rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, co-operative and competitive, creative and destructive all at the same time.

This does not idealise conversation and relationship. As Stacey (2012) points out, conversations lead to patterns of interaction that are both ethical and unethical, legal and illegal, good and evil, and there is no way of predicting what will emerge at the outset. I am not claiming that the complexity approach to coaching that I am exploring here is unique (as stated above, the original LTC programme, developed

by Sally, drew heavily on relational coaching [de Haan, 2008; de Haan and Sils, 2012]), but what I am saying is that taking a complexity approach to coaching problematises perspectives that unthinkingly promote coaching as an unequivocal activity for the good. As shown above, there is a potential for coaching to be experienced and/or employed as a technique of coercive persuasion/disciplinary power, particularly when practised between manager and team member, where the asymmetry in power chances might constrain rather than enable conversation.

In encouraging leader-managers, as participants on leadership development programmes, to engage with coaching, it was neither my intention to develop them as coaches, nor to suggest that they might coach the people who reported to them. My aspirations were much more modest. Bob Garvey argues that at 'the heart of coaching and mentoring activity lie trust, reflection, listening, support and challenge' (2011: 62). In the narrative that opens this chapter, just before the role play drew to a close, the speaker/coach suggested to the reluctant coachee that one of the options open to them was to talk to his or her manager and let their concerns and feelings be known. In taking a complexity approach to coaching, we are looking to increase the chances of this happening without the need for a middleman.

Notes

1 Interestingly, in the UK, at the time of writing, there were calls on the government to commit to promoting equality for mental health in the workplace by considering amending health and safety legislation (first aid at work regulations) so as to require all employers to provide mental health first aid.
2 I am qualified and accredited in Belbin Team Roles, Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Team Management Systems (TMS), StrengthScope 360, Authentic Leader 360, Thinking Styles, and others too numerous to mention.
3 I appreciate there are others, such as Belbin Team Roles, that also offer this, but they also often employ a different set of questions and/or method of assessment than that engaged with by the participant/coachee.

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5

FORUM THEATRE

Can I play me?

I am co-leading a workshop for a group of managers. We are four months into *Making Sense of Leading* (MSOL), a year-long, in-house, leadership development programme. The title of this month's workshop is 'Leading the Staff Experience' and we are exploring conversation and relationship with the help of a mediator (Macarena Mata, co-leader for this workshop) and two professional actors (Al and Dawn). The participant asking the question, 'Can I play me?', has just observed a scenario, which she described earlier in the day, being played out by the actors as one of the simulations that they perform during the afternoon session. In the simulation, one of the actors portrays the participant, while the other portrays the role of one of the participant's direct reports, someone with whom 'this' conversation regularly recurs.

At the point when the conversation becomes stuck and repetitive, Macarena steps in to pause the action and to prompt the actors to share with the audience how the characters they are portraying are feeling and what sense they are making of what has just transpired. Usually, the next steps are an exploration of (i) what resonates with the participant whose scenario the simulation was based on, and/or the rest of the group; (ii) what is generalisable to the day-to-day conversations that we find ourselves in; and (iii) what changes the group would like to see the actors play out in the next iteration of the simulation. Frequently, in these subsequent iterations, the person whose scenario the simulation is based on steps in to replace the actor portraying him or her. However, in this instance, we are barely through the first of these steps when, rather than making suggestions to the actors, or jumping in to replace the actor playing her, the participant decides to experience what it is like to be the other person in this scenario.

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The simulation is iterated for a second time with the participant playing her colleague, one of the actors playing her, and the rest of us forming the audience of what the originator of forum theatre, Augusto Boal, termed 'spect-actors' (1979). Eight or nine minutes into the simulation, Macarena (the facilitator, who in forum theatre terminology is known as the joker) stops the action and asks the participant how she is feeling and what's happening for her. After what seems like a considerable period of silence and stillness, the participant replies:

> I know that this isn't the real conversation, and I know that I can only speculate what the person that I am playing actually feels like when we have this conversation … but if she feels a fraction of what I am feeling now, then I need to do something different.

The use of theatre in leadership development

> Well it's just paint in the end, and you push it around until it works – that's all. You get better at it over the years, but you build up your marks and your way of doing things … You've just got to keep doing it.
>
> *Prunella Clough, Artist (1919–1999)*

The tools and techniques of theatre, and the use of live simulations involving actors, have been an integral part of the leadership development programmes that I have been involved in for as long as I can remember. Over recent years, the focus of my attention and thus my way of working with these techniques has radically changed. In this chapter, I explore how drama and actors are conventionally employed in leadership development, with specific reference to the techniques of forum theatre (Boal, 1979), before comparing this with the complexity approach that I have more recently adopted in my practice. In doing so, I also explore the shift in my understanding and approach to conflict, communication, and creativity.

Rae argues that the use of 'theatre and drama as a vehicle for organizational development has become increasingly popular in organizations, whether hiring professional actors to support skills development or, more recently, using drama to address wider organizational issues such as diversity, bullying and harassment or conflict management through the use of a particular form of "organizational theatre", namely forum theatre' (2013: 220). However, despite its ubiquity, there is very little to be found in mainstream leadership and management development textbooks about the use of theatre in leadership development. Indeed, as outlined in the Introduction, one of the reasons why I decided to write this book was because mainstream textbooks on leadership and management development inevitably sacrifice depth for breadth. This means that interventions are dealt with superficially, if at all, and are, for the most part, taken at face value with little critique.

Take the textbooks on leadership development that are recommended to UK students, for example. As outlined in the previous chapter, the three leading leadership development textbooks on the reading lists of UK business schools are written by Dalton (2010), Gold *et al*. (2010), and Carmichael *et al*. (2011). Dalton allots two pages to the use of theatre in leadership development, Gold *et al*. allocate just half a page (out of 400), and it is not covered at all by Carmichael *et al*. Furthermore, Gold *et al's* half-page is clearly an endorsement of Olivier's and Verity's (2008) use of Shakespeare in Executive Development Programmes (Gold *et al*., 2010: 157), while Dalton uses one of the two pages he allots to this topic to provide a brief overview of dramaturgy and the other to promote an obsolete consultancy service that the Royal Shakespeare Company once offered (2010: 31 and 249, respectively).[1]

Snook *et al*. devote a whole chapter, entitled *Mastering the Art of Leadership: An Experiential Approach from the Performing Arts* by Belle Linda Halpern and Richard Richards, to the use and usefulness of the performing arts in leadership development (2012: 135). And although they do not label what they are doing as forum theatre, I would argue that their rather instrumental use of theatre, drama, and actors as a resource for developing in leaders the capacity to influence and to transmit a confident and congruent message/story/vision is what most conventional leadership development providers currently describe as forum theatre. Halpern and Richards find themselves supporting managers to deliver communications that manipulate the emotions of others, thus capturing 'hearts and minds' (Snook *et al*., 2012: 148); and I would argue that this more accurately describes what Rae and I have encountered under the guise of forum theatre. Consequently, in this chapter, I will compare Halpern and Richards' use of drama and actors with the complexity approach that I am taking in my practice.

Halpern and Richards use the term 'presence' to describe the capacities that they are looking to develop in managers. They describe leadership presence as 'the ability to authentically connect with the thoughts and feelings of others in order to motivate and inspire them toward a desired outcome' (Snook *et al*., 2012: 136). The four-step model of the elements that they feel contribute to presence goes under the mnemonic of 'PRES – Present, Reaching out, Expressiveness, and Self-knowledge' (ibid.). Halpern and Richards contend that the performance arts contribute to the 'content and context' of the leadership development interventions that they are involved in. In terms of content, they argue that 'exercises inspired by acting training can build skill and awareness in the ability to be present, reach out, be expressive and self-knowing – all of which lead to the crucial leadership competency of being able to authentically connect with the hearts and minds of others, in order to inspire them to do great things … [And] in terms of context, the theatre metaphor is tremendously useful in designing the arc of a complex, multi-modal, and engaging leadership program that offers a robust environment for learning' (ibid.: 148).

To illustrate the type of learning that can occur when working with actors, Halpern and Richards share a reflective narrative from their practice in which a participant in one of their programmes, Mary Ann, plays out a scenario from her own

experience with the help of one of the professional actors. Halpern and Richards report that in the group discussion that follows the simulation, Mary Ann tells the group that the simulation has helped her to realise that 'strategic vulnerability is required in leadership' (Snook *et al*., 2012: 144). Halpern and Richards summarise this learning with, 'Mary Ann takes away ideas of how she might share herself more with her team, even strategically share that she is not always so sure of herself or share some of her developmental goals' (ibid.).

After rereading the two narratives (the one I share at the top of this chapter, and the one from Halpern and Richards, from which the snippet above is taken), for me the most striking thing is the difference in focus. The respective participants find themselves paying attention to very different things and this shows up in the next steps that each individual identifies. In Halpern and Richards's narrative, Mary Ann's first thoughts are focused on the *self* (in relation to self) and consequently the actions she identifies relate to what she might *do to influence* her team's perceptions of her. Whereas in my narrative, the participant's first thoughts are focused on (self in and with relation to – see Chapter 4) the *other* person and the resultant actions relate to how the participant might need to *be* to mitigate the impact she feels that she might be having on her colleague, rather than influencing or manipulating her.

Now, I am fairly certain that Halpern and Richards could provide plenty of narratives in which the participant's focus was reversed, as indeed could I, but it is interesting to note that given a free choice of which narrative to use to illustrate the potential learning from our respective programmes, we decided to choose the ones we did. This points to another major difference in the respective pedagogies, a difference that I argue is generalisable to, and representative of, the praxis of many conventional leadership development providers when employing actors/forum theatre. And that is working with what 'is' rather than working with how one thinks things 'ought' to be and pushing for a premeditated outcome. As established throughout this book, in taking a complexity approach, I am encouraging sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement. In my narrative above, we (the facilitators, actors, and participants) had no preconception of what might arise in the simulated interaction, our sense-making was emergent, and we worked with the uncertainty of not knowing what learning, if any, there might be. In the example from Halpern and Richards, however, the use of forum theatre is much more instrumental; it is the backdrop for a coaching exercise aimed at providing the participant with an abstract paradigm of how things ought to be and an opportunity to practise the steps they need to take in order to achieve the predetermined outcome that they desire.

It takes one to know one

The reason why so much of what Halpern and Richards describe resonates with me is in no small part due to a recognition that the way in which they appear to be utilising the tools and techniques of the acting profession in their programmes is

unerringly similar to the way in which I used to employ them in my own practice. When I started out, actors supported the leadership development interventions that I was leading, or participating in as a practising manager, in one of two ways. They either attended 'performance management' workshops to illustrate the dos and don'ts of difficult conversations, thus sparing participants from the anxiety-provoking prospect of the dreaded role play. Or they were invited to presentation skills workshops to share with participants dramatic techniques to support the development of 'gravitas' when presenting themselves and their ideas to others.

However, over recent years, my focus and practice have dramatically changed. This moves away from what I am describing as the conventional approach has been greatly influenced by my understanding of organisational life as the patterning of human bodies responding to each other in complex ways, that is, predictable and unpredictable at the same time. However, it would be useful to point out here that the movement in my thinking/practice was, and continues to be, an emergent process. My praxis has changed as a result of taking my everyday experience seriously, working from a more reality-congruent understanding of what is actually going on in the cut and thrust of organisational life and making sense of how I might more usefully play into the interactions that constitute the daily activity that we call work. Hence, in using forum theatre, we encourage the actors to simulate what is actually going on for people at work, rather than playing out abstractions of how things ought to be. This means challenging the deceptive certainty of the abstract models and frameworks of leadership and organisation found in the mainstream discourse and engaging with thinkers who are trying to make sense of the ambiguities and paradoxes of leading and organising to provide a more nuanced understanding of work and the human condition. This is an understanding that resonates with my own lived experience, and that of the participants on the programmes that I lead – a perspective that proffers a more complex and practically useful explanation of the everyday politics involved in coming together to get things done.

Prior to this, I spent an inordinate amount of time trying to match my experience of the (messy and ordered, creative and destructive, rational and irrational, exhilarating and frustrating) world of work to the latest management fad that mainstream and popular management literature had to offer and inviting the manager-participants on the leadership development programmes that I was leading at the time to do the same. And, as noted in the Introduction, I would have most probably carried on working in this way, until my growing cynicism and disillusionment proved too much, had I not sat down for a meeting with Professor Ralph Stacey in 2007 to discuss a change management programme that I was involved in. That initial conversation with Ralph encouraged me to re-entertain a liberating, and at the same time, anxiety-provoking thought that I had suppressed many times over the years and that thought was – there are no recipes for this stuff; models and frameworks of change are nonsense, and I don't find them helpful.

Although this conversation was the catalyst that led to my decision to enrol on the DMan programme and engage with Ralph's research more formally, the

movement in thought didn't start or end with this discussion. The development of my thinking/practice was, and is, an ongoing, never-ending process. It was not, and is not, like flicking a switch between old thinking and new thinking. Mainstream conceptions of leadership and organisation still dominate the (organisational) habitus and they will always be present in the amalgamation (Flinn, 2011) of thought and experience that informs my praxis. Similarly, my way of working with actors and the techniques of forum theatre described in this chapter is an emergent process started by a chance meeting with (my now good friend and colleague) Macarena Mata, a professional mediator. And at this point, it is important to point out that however 'concrete' our methods and practice appear when written up in print, to echo the Clough (2016) quote that opens this chapter, every workshop is a new canvas on which we 'push the paint around until it works'.

A meeting of minds?

I met Macarena, an external consultant, for the first time when she came to the university to work with a group of colleagues and I was called on to help her to set up the audio-visual equipment. As I set up the laptop and launched her slide show, I noticed that the title of her presentation, and theme of the workshop, was 'Conflict Resolution'. The half-day workshop was due to start, so I wished her well and left her to it. If there had been more time, I was really interested to ask whether she, as a professional mediator, felt that conflict could be resolved, and if so, whether one could teach people to do this, and in 3 hours. When it came to the end of the session, I returned to dismantle the audio-visual equipment and took the opportunity to tentatively ask the questions I'd shied away from earlier. I cannot remember exactly what Macarena said at the time, but when I recount this tale to workshop participants, I reductively recall her answers as 'Yes and no', 'Yes and no', and 'No and yes'. Whatever her exact words, the questions provided the catalyst for a discussion that we are still having to this day.

Our main points of agreement in that first conversation were that (i) conflict is not negative: it is an unavoidable part of day-to-day life and has the potential to be constructive as well as destructive; creativity and novelty arise from difference; (ii) some conflicts can be resolved, but more often than not 'resolution' means negotiating a way of going on together in spite of the differences and reaching an accommodation that both parties can live with or, if this is not possible, feel settled knowing that you've done all you can; (iii) managing conflict is not about getting the other party to see it your way ('winning hearts and minds'), it's about developing the capacity to acknowledge and work with the strong emotions that conflict stir, keeping oneself safe in the process, seeing each other as human beings, responding rather than reacting, asking oneself 'what else might be going on here?' (see Chapter 7), exploring the interests and needs of both parties with a view to coming to a common understanding and recognising that you have choices; (iv) it is not about manipulating others so that they become subject to your will,

rather it is about learning to interact with others in a way that does not denigrate either party's sense of self; and (v) there are no recipes, no easy answers, and no guarantees that what you say or do will improve the situation; it may make matters worse and not just worse before they get better.

The understanding that we reached in that initial conversation, which was much more fragmentary than the polished version presented above, was enough for us to agree to work together to bring some of these ideas and ways of working to the leadership development programmes I was involved in. That was some eight years ago, and we are still working out what it is that we are doing together as our thinking continues to shift and move. The first workshops that we co-facilitated didn't involve actors and we struggled with the challenge of talking about conversation rather than experiencing it. We considered introducing participant role play, but in our experience, this is not only anxiety-provoking, for students and facilitators alike, but it is also difficult for participants to remain in character in order to sustain the simulation for any useful length of time. Consequently, our thoughts turned to bringing in actors, but I did not want to work with them as I had in the past. It was around this time that I first encountered forum theatre (Boal, 1979), during an exercise that I participated in, led by Henry Larsen.[2]

Forum theatre

Henry Larsen is a Professor of Participatory Innovation at the University of Southern Denmark, and before taking up this post, he was a member of the Dacapo Theatre Company. Dacapo is a Danish firm of management consultants that has for over 25 years been at the forefront of using forum theatre as a means of helping organisations explore the challenges and opportunities they face. As mentioned above, forum theatre was originally developed by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre director, writer, and (latterly) politician. Boal, building on Paulo Freire's ideas in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000), developed his concept of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. Boal saw theatre as an opportunity for the audience to get involved with the drama/actors and try out different responses as a means of finding their own agency and in so doing identifying spaces for emancipation.

This way of working came to be known as forum theatre in which scenes that are pertinent to the audience are acted out before being stopped by the joker with a view to not only opening up a dialogue and inviting direction from the audience but also inviting audience members to join the action and interact with the actors as a means of exploring how power is enacted. The main differences between my previous way of working with actors and the way Dacapo worked were that (i) Henry and his colleagues played out scenarios that had been painstakingly developed during several preparatory visits/conversations with the participants involved in the process; and (ii) the resultant scenarios were catalysts for conversation, rather than a means of rehearsing how to 'get it right'.[3]

This resonated with the way in which Macarena and I wanted to position our workshops. Our intention was to explore conversations and relationships in general and those which we found difficult in particular, drawing on Macarena's experience of working with people in conflict. So, once we had decided to involve professional actors in our workshops, we spent time working with them as well as a small group of managers preparing and developing a range of generic scenarios that would highlight the kinds of conflict that can arise between managers and their team members, peers, and line managers. We could not, nor were we attempting to, do what Dacapo was doing, but we took something from their way of working that we felt was generalisable and worked it into our practice. We set out to do two things. First, we wanted to work with groups of managers to explore and make sense of their experience of conversation and relationship. And second, we wanted to help them to become more adept at conversation by developing awareness of self in relation to others and developing the capacities for observing/noticing, listening, questioning, summarising, acknowledging, and working with affect.

Rae's research into the use of forum theatre in organisational settings involved not only observation and participation in such events but also extensive interviews with the commissioners, providers, actors, and participants involved (Rae, 2013). She found that although the term was freely used by those commissioning such interventions (human resource and development professionals), when probed they were 'unclear about what theatre-based and forum theatre interventions can potentially offer … and were generally less able to articulate how they perceived theatre-based interventions could support organizational learning, and change' (ibid.: 233). One of the espoused aims of forum theatre in organisational settings is 'to provide opportunities for more democratic approaches to learning and development, through offering participants open ended dramatised narratives, usually based on organizational events, and allowing participants to take that narrative in a direction which is not necessarily bounded by management intentions' (ibid.: 221).[4] However, Rae found that this was often compromised in practice, often by the jokers whom she argues lacked one or more of three things.

First, Rae found that the jokers in her study often lacked training. One of the actors interviewed by Rae reported, 'We get a day or two days' training maximum as forum theatre facilitators. You know, some facilitators, they do exams in it […] you sink or swim' (2013: 227). Second, they lacked, or more accurately were unable to maintain, focus. Rae's jokers often found themselves doubling up as actors due to the budgetary constraints of the commissioning organisation (Boal recommends a minimum of three facilitators – two actors and a joker). And third, and perhaps most importantly, Rae found that the jokers in her study lacked impartiality. In forum theatre, the impartiality of the joker is key.[5] For Boal, the joker must be like the joker in a deck of playing cards. That is, someone who is 'not tied down to a specific suit or value' and has 'no allegiance to performer, spectator, or any one interpretation of events' (ibid.: 222). Rae, however, in her observations and interviews with participants, discovered that the jokers' 'primary focus was

on the need to meet the commissioners' expectations', rather than 'responding to the direction of the participants'; instead of opening up learning spaces, the jokers manipulated the simulations in order to ensure that 'events were controlled and managed' (ibid.: 228).

She concludes that 'while employees were engaged in the process and perceived such events as being highly participative, the extent to which the outcomes were emergent rather than pre-determined is open to question' (ibid.: 231). Reflecting on one particular forum theatre event that she observed, Rae reports:

> While the dramas brought to life the realities of day-to-day working life – for example, a reluctance to challenge colleagues for fear of making working relationships difficult; the need for a supportive culture in which these issues can be aired – the focus remained on the individual behaviours rather than underlying issues.
>
> *(2011: 11)*

Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman (2006) use the term theatre of the oppressed (TO), rather than forum theatre, to describe Boal's way of working, Boal's own descriptor. They argue that there is a tendency to oversimplify and gloss over the complexities and ambiguities that might surface during TO/forum theatre events where, as facilitators/jokers, we all too often 'take a how-to approach, forgetting that the "how" needs to be as mutable as the ideas that inform it; we tend to replicate what "worked" in one context into another, forgetting that TO is predicated on a vigilant receptivity to difference across time, circumstance, geography, culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender' (ibid.: 1). They argue that Boal translated Freire's idea of 'replacing the prevalent banking method of education (filling students' heads with what experts deem important) with a dialogic approach to learning in which students and teachers are interactive partners' developing the concept of the 'spect-actor, who replaces the spectator sitting passively in the dark watching the finished production. As Freire broke the hierarchical divide between teacher and student, Boal did so between performer and audience member' (ibid.: 3).

At this point, it would be relatively easy to use Rae's findings as validation for our way of working. I could claim that we have avoided all of the pitfalls that she identifies by having (i) a 'commissioner' (me) who is fully aware of the potential that forum theatre has to offer to 'support organizational learning, and change' (Rae, 2011: 233); (ii) two professional actors who are able to focus on the job in hand rather than having to double up as facilitators; and (iii) a joker and professional qualified mediator for whom impartiality is paramount. However, such a convenient post-rationalisation would be a misrepresentation of the emergent, messy, and fragmentary back-and-forth that has characterised our collaboration over the last eight years. Similarly, I could argue that our way of working does blur the boundaries between teacher/student, performer/audience member, but that we also offer some 'banking' around questioning, listening, summarising, and assertive communication.

So how would I describe the difference between the conventional approach to the use of (forum) theatre in leadership development, illustrated by Halpern and Richard's practice, and what I am describing as a complexity approach? First, it's about having a good working knowledge of the philosophy and principles of forum theatre (particularly the roles played by the joker and the actors) and the generative potential of this way of working, as described above.[6] At the same time, it's about working from a radically different understanding of conflict, communication, and creativity than that found in the dominant discourse, something that I turn my attention to now.

Conflict, communication, and creativity

Conflict as the ongoing negotiation of difference

As outlined above, most managers who enrol in the leadership development programmes that I am involved in see conflict as a battle to be won – how do I get the other party or parties to see things my way? This reflects the mainstream characterisation of conflict as 'antagonistic relationships between people' (Grant quoted in Stacey and Griffin, 2008). And the minority of managers who acknowledge the need to listen and put themselves in the other party's shoes, see conflict as an undesirable state that should be replaced by some form of consensus that reconciles difference and brings about harmony. Thus, both groups see conflict as something to be overcome, one more thing to get on top of and control, whereas from a complexity perspective, conflict is seen as 'an inevitable aspect of all human relationships' (ibid.: 46). In our ongoing interactions with each other, we compete, and we collaborate, but competition and collaboration are not mutually exclusive – they paradoxically co-exist. From this perspective, it is not unreasonable to talk about competitive collaboration, or collaborative competition, as we negotiate a way of going on together that acknowledges but works with the tension. Taking a complexity approach, it is neither possible to eradicate conflict by beating oneself or the other into submission nor to replace it with some form of utopian consensus or self-suppression. Attempts to eradicate or neutralise conflict (difference), which in organisational settings are present in the many calls for alignment to the strategic plan, shared values, one vision, etc., are not only futile (with totalitarian undertones), but they also discourage the very characteristics that many organisations are looking to foster in their strategic plans, values, and visions, namely, novelty, diversity and innovation.

Two colleagues who have taken their experience of conflict seriously are Nol Groot (2005) and Eric Wenzel (2011).[7] Groot, in trying to make sense of his time as managing director of a division of a large services company in the Netherlands, reflects upon his experience of leading organisation-wide contract negotiations with the unions representing workers in the various companies making up the group. During these negotiations, Groot attempted to avoid the mistakes of the recent past that were still reverberating around the organisation by 'focusing not on the negotiating position, but on building relationships' (ibid.: 56). To help with the reflexive

interrogation of his own thinking about what it means to be in conflict, Groot explores mainstream conceptions before comparing them with understandings from the perspective of complex responsive processes. He uses the term *polarized conflict* to describe mainstream understandings of conflict as 'a social phenomenon involving a struggle aimed at neutralising, injuring or eliminating the values, status, power and resources of opponents' (ibid.: 57). The corresponding recommendation from this mainstream perspective is that conflict should be prevented, repressed, or resolved by bringing things out into the open, surfacing the unmet needs of each party and clearing up any misunderstandings (Glasl, 1999). Groot categorises these approaches that ignore, avoid, or harmoniously resolve difference(s) as *preventative conflict* (2005: 57).

From the perspective of complex responsive processes, conflict is seen as an ever-present aspect of human relationships. It is the inevitable consequence of people trying to make sense of the world and of themselves as well as competing and co-operating with others where competition and cooperation are two sides of the same coin. Groot uses the term *normative conflict* to describe this view. And if one takes this perspective, then the most useful approach is not to dismiss, run from, or reconcile, but rather to see it as 'an ongoing process of discussing and exploring difference involving both co-operation and competition without necessarily breaking down as hostility of some kind' (2005: 58). Groot describes this approach to the negotiation of difference(s) as *explorative conflict*. He acknowledges that this approach will not necessarily prevent polarised conflict, but in his experience explorative conflict 'can create solutions and prevent people from getting stuck' (ibid.: 60). When it came to leading the negotiations with the unions, Groot's shifting understanding of what it means to be in conflict influenced him to abandon 'standard negotiation procedures' and instead to create 'opportunities for discussion' that avoided the polarised positions of old (ibid.: 78). And for Groot, after Griffin (2002), this involved the recreation and negotiation of identities (ibid.: 158).

This notion of conflict as the negotiation of identity is something that Eric Wenzel (2011) explores in his research. We met Eric in the vignette that accompanies Chapter 4. His doctoral research centred on trying to make sense of what he was being asked to do as a management consultant when invited into organisations. Wenzel often found himself caught in the middle between the senior managers who had commissioned his engagement and the middle managers who would be tasked with implementing his recommendations. Invariably, the mismatch between (senior manager) aspirations and operational realities (facing middle managers) was a constant source of conflict. Building on Groot's work on polarised and explorative conflict, Wenzel explores conflict as simultaneous processes of mutual recognition and misrecognition, whereby the struggle for recognition involves the negotiation, or re-negotiation, of identity. For Wenzel:

> The act of recognition is more than acknowledgement of the other. It is a deep acceptance of the other in his/her right to be different. More importantly, it

> means accepting ourselves in and through the other. The other is both, different and the same. This may not do away with our anxieties. But it may help us to accept them as a necessary element of the conflictual dimension of human interrelating.
>
> *Ibid.: 65*

Groot's conception of explorative conflict is useful, as I think what Macarena, Al, Dawn, and I are doing is exploring conflict, but I find the split between explorative conflict and polarised conflict less so, as the potential for participants to polarise (by repressing, avoiding, or seeking an idealistic harmony) even in their exploration is ever-present. It is not either/or, this or that; polarised conflict and explorative conflict simultaneously co-exist. Groot's expression of what might be happening in the interaction when one tries to explore conflict is helpful, but the label is not. As soon as one uses a label like 'explorative conflict' to describe an approach to the negotiation of difference, there is a temptation to reify it as a tool or technique that can be used instrumentally, a 'best practice' solution for how to manage conflict. Similarly, it sets up the false dichotomy of polarised conflict as 'bad' and explorative conflict as 'good'; but in the negotiation of difference, there may well be times when positions are or become irreconcilable, or when the most useful next step might be to avoid or repress conflict in order to maintain the relationship, and/or one's job, and/or one's sense of self (identity).[8]

Wenzel's research draws attention to an aspect of conflict that is often glossed over in mainstream literature, something central to Boal's work, and that is power relations. One could argue that the intention of Boal's TO is to encourage spect-actors to challenge the status quo with a view to shifting the power differentials in favour of the oppressed, thus engendering some degree of emancipation.[9] Here conflict is polarised – them against us. From the perspective of complex responsive processes, the exploration of power relations is not about emancipation but rather sense-making and understanding, which may or may not be emancipatory. For the leader-managers that we work with, in their relationships with team members (direct reports, subordinates), they, as leader-managers, have the greater power chances. That is, the power differential is in their favour.

Thus, in what we might more accurately describe as our 'theatre of the oppressors', rather than seeking emancipation, we are encouraging managers to explore difference with a view to reaching an accommodation, a way of going on together, that both parties find acceptable, or if this is not possible, to at least be comfortable that they have done everything they can to allow this to happen.[10] One might ask why this is necessary when the power differential favours the managers. If team members don't see it your way, simply get them to comply. Well, leaving aside the moral and ethical ramifications of this question, for the moment, the exploration of difference is a catalyst for reflexivity (Flinn, 2011; Flinn and Mowles, 2014). And the exploration/encouragement of opposing views/dissent (Tourish, 2013) is a means of offsetting the excesses of hubris (de Haan and Kasozi, 2014), and

functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016), as outlined in earlier chapters. Working with difference and conflict in this way calls for a very different understanding of communication than that found in the mainstream.

Communication as iterative processes of gesture and response

My early understanding of communication was based on the sender-receiver model. Ann Cunliffe argues that the sender-receiver model of communication is based on the premise that:

> - There are *independent* and *autonomous* senders and receivers each with a message in mind that they want to convey to the other.
> - The sender *first thinks* of what she or he wants to say and the best way of saying it (encodes) *before transmitting* the message.
> - The receiver hears/reads the message and *decodes its real meaning*. If the receiver doesn't understand, for whatever reason, he or she will indicate this through feedback, which then enables the sender to rephrase the message or add further information. So communication is a recursive process culminating in an agreement over meaning.
>
> *(2009: 54; emphasis in the original)*

Cunliffe argues that in this conception of communication, 'management is about the art of persuasion' (ibid.: 55), about transmitting a message that convinces the hearer to see it your way and do your bidding. This conception of communication is evident in the praxis of Halpern and Richards when they argue that:

> Leaders with presence send a single message. They pay attention to eye contact, body language, voice variability, pacing, silence, the use of space to express a uniform message. Concerned? They pause. Excited? They speak faster. Eager? They lean forward. They use language and story to reach the hearts and minds of their audiences – to make sure their message lands. You know good acting when you see it because you believe what you see and that transports you into the story. You know good leadership for the same reasons.
>
> *Halpern and Richards in Snook et al. (2012: 138)*

Cunliffe accepts that there are times when we might prepare what we have to say in advance, occasions where we might learn a speech by rote, or write something down and read it word for word. However, she argues that once we enter into a conversation, what we say will be a 'mix of previously thought words and sentences, along with improvisations as [we] respond to the other person' (2009: 55). Cunliffe draws on the work of Bakhtin and his conception of dialogism where meaning emerges in the 'interaction and struggle' (Bakhtin, 1986: 92). This is markedly

different from the sender-receiver model and similar to the understanding that informs the complexity approach to communication.

Informed by the work of the American pragmatist philosopher, George Herbert Mead, I see communications/conversations as iterative processes of gesture and response. Mead (1934) argues that consciousness and self-consciousness emerge in the conversation of gestures between engaged human beings, where a gesture calls out a response in the gesturer that is similar to the response that same gesture calls out in the other. This means that a gesturer can, to some extent, anticipate the response that they are likely to call out in the other; modifying what they are saying as they are saying it. Thus, the gesturer is gesturing to themselves and the other, at the same time. Both are responding to each other according to their life histories. So rather than understanding communication as a message being repeatedly transmitted by an autonomous sender to an equally autonomous receiver, until the receiver understands the sender's original meaning, Mead posits that meaning emerges in the iterative social process of gesture and response since the gesture can never be separated from the response:

> The response of one organism to the gesture of another in any given social act is the meaning of that gesture, and also is in a sense responsible for the appearance or coming into being of the new object – or new content of an old object – to which that gesture refers through the outcome of the given social act in which it is an early phase.
>
> *(1934: 78)*

If you recall an occasion when you caught yourself adjusting mid-sentence how and/or what you were saying because the verbal or non-verbal reaction of the person you were speaking to did not appear to be eliciting the response you had hoped for, then you will not only begin to appreciate Mead's insight, but you will also see how inadequate the sender-receiver model is for explaining what is actually happening when we communicate with each other. Understanding the various responses we are having to the gestures we are in the process of making to another allows us to anticipate, and to some extent predict, the response we might be about to call forth in the other. Mead described gestures that are to a degree shared as being significant symbols, that is, acts of communication (a frown, for example) that are generally understood by the people with whom we interact. Significant symbols make it possible for us, as human beings, to make sense of each other. Mead considered the vocal gesture as the most useful significant symbol, and the development of sophisticated vocal gestures, that is, language, as central to the development of consciousness.

This ability to take the attitude of the other allows us to play out the possible outcomes of our actions as private role plays. Indeed, Mead described humans as role-playing animals. He further argued that as we engage in more and more

interactions the mind 'evolves in increasingly complex ways' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 345), to the point where we are able to take in the attitude of many others, which Mead (1934) describes as the 'attitude of the generalised other'. That is, we are able to take in the attitude of the whole group/society in generalised form, thus enabling us to predict the reception (response) our words and deeds (gestures) are likely to provoke. This acts as a 'powerful form of social control through self-control' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 345). However, Mead was also at pains to point out that his theory is not a form of social determinism. That is, there is no guarantee that the responses my gestures call forth in me will call forth the same responses in you. This is because the response that my gesture calls forth in me is partly the result of my experience of the thousands of interactions that I have had during my lifetime, and the response it might call forth in you is partly the result of your corresponding life experience. My gestures are themselves responses to the millions of gestures that have been made to me in the hundreds of thousands of conversations I have already had, in addition to the silent conversations (role plays) I have with myself. And this takes no account of the potential for you to have a spontaneous response to my gesture: something evoked in you for the first time. Indeed, I cannot even guarantee my responses to my own gestures. A good example of this is when we might find ourselves inadvertently blushing when we disclose something.

This is a radically different view of communication from the sender-receiver models contained in mainstream and popular management literature. Communication is not seen as an event, as a parcel of data conveyed from one person to another, rather as an iterative process of sense-making and negotiation whereby meaning is contained not merely in words, policy documents, or directives, but also in how such things are being taken up by people in local interaction. So, for example, as outlined in Chapter 3, the meaning of an address by a chief executive officer (CEO) is not in his or her gift as it will be interpreted differently in the many and varied local interactions that take place as individuals and groups try to make sense of what they've heard. So, one can see that using actors to rehearse one's part in a future conversation makes sense from the sender-receiver perspective, but none whatsoever from the perspective of complex responsive processes. For me and Macarena, the use of actors/forum theatre is not a dress rehearsal but rather an opportunity to develop self-awareness and explore what it means to improvise and become adept at conversation. Organisational consultant Michael Shiel contends that in these situations, the role of the leader is to stay in the conversation with a view to drawing attention to 'surprises, irregularities and misunderstandings' and 'encourag[ing] new patterns of thinking and knowing to emerge in joint exploratory learning'. This involves developing the ability to pay attention to the processes of communication, 'as well as being fully present to the changing patterning of the silent conversation with oneself' (2005: 183).

If we compare mainstream and complexity understandings of communication using the Martin Luther King Jr narrative from Chapter 2, then the sender-receiver model of communication might explain King's 'I have a dream' detour as a message that King sends to an expectant crowd who are passively waiting to receive it. From the perspective of complex responsive processes, it is a response to the gesture from Mahalia Jackson, where the response cannot be separated from the gesture. The meaning of Mahalia Jackson's ('Tell 'em about the "Dream", Martin') gesture only becomes apparent in King's response. Jackson's gesture is itself a response to the *present* (her own gestures and responses and those of King and the crowd), drawing on the *past* (her own previous gestures and responses and those of King and different crowds when he has shared previous versions of the 'I have a dream' speech), in anticipation of the *future* (her desire to influence King). From the perspective of complex responsive processes, this is described as the living present. That is, temporal processes of interaction where our experiences and actions in the present are influenced by and influence our accounts of past experience at the same time as influencing our (anticipated) future actions (Flinn and Mowles, 2014: 2) and those of others. This understanding of communication and the living present has radical implications for thinking about creativity and the creation of (new) knowledge.

Creativity as social processes of knowledge creation

Rae experienced and explored two uses of forum theatre in her research, one that looked to encourage individual change and the other that was more concerned with bringing about change at organisational level (2011: 16). Leaving aside the split of individual and organisational (which I hope by now you have realised is problematic if you take anything but a functionalist approach), one might characterise the use that I have been exploring above as being focused on the development of individuals. The use of forum theatre in organisational change, be that a change of culture, values, strategy, purpose, or supporting transitions to new structures or ways of working, is usually referred to as organisation(al) development (something I plan to explore in my next book).

I have experienced the use of forum theatre in this way as a participant several times, but I have much less experience of facilitating such events. However, somebody who has a great deal of experience, as outlined above, is Henry Larsen. The following vignette (taken from Larsen, 2005) provides an insight into how Henry and his former colleagues work with forum theatre techniques to encourage reflexivity (see Chapter 3), that is, to help participants to think about how they are thinking with a view to exploring what might be useful for future interactions.

'So let us introduce ourselves to each other at the tables', I said to the audience. A man who was sitting with his wife at my table started to talk about their two children. Although all was well now, a few years ago, the social workers had wanted to remove their children. He and his wife had sought help from the social workers to deal with their very difficult children but they and the social workers had formed a very bad relationship. As a result, after three years, the social workers decided to take the kids into care. The man had gone to the press and finally they were allowed to change to another institution and new social workers. Within a year, they were helped so much that they were able to deal with their children without any help from 'the system'. He also mentioned that he himself had been in a children's home for 17 years. He felt that this had been used against him in the situation.

The conversations took place as a meeting in the initial phase of a research project about user involvement in the social services and the legal rights of the citizen. This particular day was about the contact of parents with 'the system'. The participants at this meeting were social workers, foster parents and assessors, and also parents who had either lost, or come close to losing, their children. We were supposed to work with the participants as an alternative to the widely used 'focus group' interviews. The idea that was by dramatising some aspects of people's stories we could uncover issues that would not come out in interviews. No one in the room had ever tried this before, and I felt anxious and tense, but, at the same time, an intense desire to find some way to explore the theme: how do we understand client involvement and legal rights?

We had split into three groups. While the man was talking, I could see that other groups were finishing their round. My colleagues and I had a plan but I felt drawn to the man's story. So I called the actors, who were sitting at the other tables. I expressed that I would like to see performed on stage the story of what the 'good' social workers had been doing and I asked the man to say something about it. He hesitated. 'We were just sitting there, and they appreciated us and helped us be parents'. 'What did they do?' I asked. He could not explain. 'What were you doing?' I asked. 'Well, we played some games with the children', was his reply. Obviously the man could not explain his relationship with the social worker, but we set up a situation with three actors, one playing the nine-year-old child who was very noisy and challenging, one playing the father, and one playing the social worker.

Usually the man would direct the actors, but obviously he was not able to do that. The actors had not heard his story from the beginning and they were confused. I sensed that we all felt that this was risky. The actors started playing cards and after a while I stopped them: the actor playing the kid had been really challenging in his role. 'What was different', I asked the man. 'The kid is OK', he said, 'and the father is OK too, sitting not knowing what to say to the child. But

the social worker is wrong. She just observed and did not take part in the play. It was taken on video, and afterwards we watched it together and talked about what I could do'. The man's speech was nearly fluent now.

The actors played again now with the 'social worker' watching. At a moment when the child was behaving badly, the 'father' took a glance at the 'social worker', she smiled and kept quiet. 'Yes, this is good', the man said, 'it is just the way it was when he ("the father") looks at her ("the social worker"), and she sits there and just smiles. I really remember it and it gave me the confidence to calm down and not be angry about the child's restlessness. We worked with this and gradually I learned how to relate to the boy'. He spoke more and more, talking fluently in a much richer language.

'Didn't she take notes?' asked a member of the audience. 'No', he said. 'There was a large board and she could write on that. In the beginning it distracted me but after a few sessions it did not disturb me. We could talk about it afterwards, and because what she wrote was visible on the board, I never felt that she had a hidden agenda'. Another member of the audience commented that what she had seen on the stage was not a good situation because no limits were set for the boy and that should not be allowed. The man replied that basically she was right, but first of all he, as a father, had to find a way to be there and cope with the situation and that was just what came out of the relation to the social worker. He explained that just by having her there and being inspired by her reactions, he found his own way of reacting in the situation with his children. 'After some months the situation changed and within a year we did not need help any more', he said.

Reflecting on this narrative six months later, Larsen added:

> Everyone in the room was engaging animatedly in what was going on, we were moving into a conversation that was at the very heart of the theme we were working with, and we were processing it together, in iterations of talking and playing. The actors contributed with experiences that in the fullest sense were embodied and emotional. They reiterated these situations by playing them again, taking the momentary conversation into consideration. So through iterating and reiterating in different ways we were all working with the theme of the day. In this way, the man was drawn into a new conversation that gave him an insight that was novel, just as the situation was novel. What happened affected the situation about the theme we were working with and its progress towards a way of understanding that which had not been understood – or understood in a different way – previously.
>
> Ibid.: 31–35

This way of working with forum theatre is starkly different from my experience of how other organisational and leadership development specialists work with it. The difference is that Dacapo uses forum theatre as a catalyst for exploration, a space where knowledge (understanding, sense-making, way of thinking) is co-created in the workshop. That is not to say that everybody walks away with the same knowledge (understanding, sense-making, way of thinking), but they do not leave with the same point of view that they entered with. Change doesn't happen as a result of the intervention, but in the midst of it. Rae argues that 'forum theatre, given its antecedents, is likely to be at its most effective if it can be used as method of providing a stimulus for participants to access and view their own experiences and form emotional connections to those experiences' (2011: 231). This goes beyond the transmission or acquisition of predetermined knowledge that informs conventional approaches towards an emergent approach to knowledge creation. Rae found that for all the talk of a dialogical approach to learning and development, the language of the practitioners and commissioners was much more didactic (ibid.: 232).

Reflections

The practices that Macarena, the actors, and I have developed, and the choices that we have made since starting to work together, have generated intended and unintended consequences. The unintended but most welcome consequence of having Macarena (a vastly experienced mediator) as a joker is impartiality. In mediation, it is not about one party agreeing to do the other party's bidding. It is not about manipulation or coercion. Mediation is about supporting both parties to come to a mutual understanding that enables them to arrive at an accommodation that both can live with. It's about negotiating a way of continuing to work/live together, or not as the case may be, in spite of differences. The mediation process encourages both parties to see each other as human beings, rather than enemies, to acknowledge each other's interests and needs, find some common ground, and come to an accommodation that views difference and conflict as a fact of life, not something to eradicate. This also means that the actors, Dawn and Al, both experienced forum theatre facilitators themselves, can concentrate on embodying the characters that they have been asked to play rather than being distracted by the duties of facilitation.[11]

The actors bring their ability to respond to each other, the participants, and the joker in character, both during and after the simulations. They are not guided by me, as the 'commissioner', to manipulate conversations in order to achieve given outcomes or learning objectives. This means that scenarios that we have been playing with for years are different every time. How the characters respond on the day is influenced by the group we are working with, by how Al and Dawn are feeling on that day, and by how Macarena and I are interacting with everyone. The actors respond as the character they have created on the day would respond, not as this character responded the last time they played this scene. Also, they are adept at

speculating what their characters might do following the interactions. This means that what they agree to in the simulation and what they speculate will happen next when prompted by the joker are often two separate things.[12] Similarly, they might appear unmoved in the conversation but subsequently inform the joker, and the rest of the audience, that something has shifted for their character, but they didn't want to admit or signal that to the other party involved in the simulation.

Again, I am not holding up this way of working as a potential exemplar or suggesting that our practice mitigates all of the tensions that Rae found in her research. We quite often have our impartiality tested as we find ourselves rooting for one or other of the characters in the simulation, or pushing for a particular technique to be employed, and as a senior manager in the institution where the workshops take place, I might find myself intervening on a matter of policy or procedure. And I am not saying that some of the managers who we work with don't leave disappointed that we have not furnished them with a recipe or *n*-step plan for how to have difficult conversations. Nevertheless, most participants find this to be one of the most useful sessions of the programme. I hope that the above narrative has illustrated the emergent and emerging nature of our current way of working. What works for us won't necessarily work for you. So, I am not suggesting that you go and employ the services of a mediator as joker, for example. What I am encouraging you to do is reflect on your own practice, and see what, if anything, is generalisable from our experience. I would also encourage you to compare mainstream conceptions of conflict, communication, and creativity with a complexity approach and consider which you find to be more congruent with your own day-to-day experience.

Notes

1 I had no plans to record the number of pages allotted in each of the three textbooks, to the leadership development interventions under review, until it became apparent that it is (i) a useful illustration of the superficiality with which the interventions are covered (bar coaching, to which Gold *et al*. dedicate some 15 pages) and (ii) indicative of how such perspectives, tools, and techniques are more often than not accepted at face value with little, if any, critique offered.

2 Henry responded to my invitation to write a rejoinder for the second edition in a much more interesting way than I had envisaged. Rather than supplying me with a brief update on how his thinking might have developed, since writing the vignette contained in the chapter, he reviewed the whole chapter and added comments in the margin. So, rather than diluting the richness of this contribution by 'forcing' him to sum these thoughts up in 1000 words or less, I've added a selection of his comments here, in Notes – which I'll signify with 'Henry' followed by his comments in italics. At this point, for instance, Henry commented: Henry – *I would claim that what you experienced was not forum theatre.* Clark and Mangham (2004*) and other hardcore Boal researchers would agree. I would say that we worked with Boal's techniques, but with a radically different understanding of power relations and the role of our interaction with each other and the audience.*

3 Henry – *We also worked with improvising on the spot. Hearing a story from people in the audience, improvising it on stage (with fictitious names) and then use that for exploring what is at stake and how possible movements could be taken explored by trying ideas out on stage.*

4 Henry – *It is this theme that I have been working with and detach myself from – the normative idea that the facilitator enables democratic approaches, or that the format does by itself. When it works best, it enables movements from stuck positions. I agree that each of us ethically needs to make an effort to give room for those who we believe does not have a (strong) voice, but we need to critically reflect whether this is what we actually do, and we can of course only reflect that in hindsight.*
5 Henry – *Yes, for Boal, but I would say that this is a manipulative unrealistic claim. So, what I argue in my texts is that you need to engage with your intention but stay curious and with an (unpleasant and risky) willingness to allow yourself to be influenced by what you hear. The joker role can then be to not try to play the jester, but to engage with your own conviction and intention – but do that as open as you can. As an example, now and then bring in own experiences that contradicts what is emerging and see the reaction. So, a jester/ joker role that is more true to who you are.*
6 Henry – *Yes, but from what I see, also a different position than Boal is taking.*
7 I draw on these authors because they are practitioners who take a complexity approach in their practice, work across cultures, and explore themes that have helped me to make a better sense of how to work with conflict in organisational settings. A bonus is that their unpublished doctoral theses are also available for free via the internet.
8 Henry – *And the consequence is that working with improvised theatre is not without risk. On the contrary you cannot know what might emerge, and maybe even explode around your ears. My chapter on in the thesis tells such a story. I have been working quite a lot about encouraging and training people to work with improvised theatre, and this is for me the basic and most difficult theme to teach. However, when it happens, it changes people's approach also to other things than just theatre impro.*
9 Henry – *It is, and as such one of the reasons that I claim not doing forum theatre.*
10 Henry – *And here the fiction allows for playing with it in ways that are experienced as less risky. At the same time as people know that the work is real, which the fiction enables.*
11 Henry – *I have discussed this quite a lot with actors. Those that I am working closest with starts engaging more and more also with their reflections. In the end this is also about trust and allowing for improvisation. As well as I might now and then take a role.*
12 Henry – *And it is not just the joker who are in control/power here:).*

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6

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES

Introduction

In this chapter, I turn my attention to the type of on-programme leadership development activities designed to encourage experiential learning, that is, exercises, simulations, and (live) case studies. I contend that these activities do hold the potential to generate some salient lessons; however, they are often not the ones that are promised in advance by the consultants/cies that specialise in the design and delivery of such interventions. The same can be said for large-scale interventions, ranging from ropes courses and orienteering through to full-blown expeditions in the great outdoors, where the lessons that are often overlooked are the opportunities to hone the capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement. I also showcase reflective narrative writing as a valuable means of intensifying and deepening one's thinking and exploring the parallels between one's experience on leadership development programmes and one's day-to-day practice.

That's edutainment!

It's Thursday morning. I have just sat down to have breakfast in the hotel restaurant. I am looking out for my two colleagues. We arranged to meet up early, as usual, before the 3 host-partners and the 24 programme participants arrive. We are meeting to reflect upon yesterday and prepare for the day ahead. It is day 4 of the five-day leadership development programme that we run for a global management consultancy. 'We' are the three-strong team that work for the leadership development consultancy contracted to the firm. As client director and programme manager, it is my responsibility to ensure that things run smoothly and that participants have an 'awesome' learning experience. The five-day programme is topped and

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tailed with one-to-one coaching sessions based on the report generated from the competency-based, 360° feedback questionnaire responses collated in advance of the programme. As usual, my colleagues and I have been working with three host-partners from the client company with whom we co-facilitate the programme. Each one of us is paired with one of the host-partners and each pairing has been working with the group of eight participants we were allocated before the start of the programme. This is programme 16 of the 20 or so that we run each year.

Lewis arrives first, closely followed by Clive. If previous mornings are anything to go by, we have about 20 minutes before the others arrive. Lewis kicks off our conversation:

'Did you get the call last night?'
'Yes, I did', I respond. 'And I let them know in no uncertain terms that I wasn't impressed'.

Wednesdays are half-day sessions, an opportunity for an afternoon of rest and/or recreation during what are often intense and full-on weeks. There is usually some form of activity organised for the participants – skiing (in ski resorts), surfing (if we happen to be at a beach location), or hiking (if the hotel is situated in a forest in the middle of nowhere). As faculty, we are always invited to join in the recreational activities, but attendance is not compulsory. Arrangements for dinner also differ on Wednesday evenings, with participants and faculty being left to their own devices rather than being scheduled to dine together at the hotel and engage in the post-dinner ritual of 'Points' (more of which later). Last night we decided to leave the participants to do their own thing and we dined at a local restaurant with the host-partners before retiring to bed at a reasonable hour. During the night, I was woken by the telephone ringing. I picked up the receiver and glanced at the bedside clock – 2.34 a.m. At the other end of the line was one of the programme participants who greeted me with:

'Kevin, we're all down by the pool, partying, come and join us'.

With as much grace as I could muster, I said that I would not be joining the 'pool party' and reminded him that we had a 9.00-a.m. start and that I expected everyone to be there, on time, 'bright-eyed and bushy-tailed'. I then went back to sleep.

'I told them where to get off, too', said Lewis.
'Oh – I joined them for an hour', said Clive, sheepishly. 'Well, they'd already woken me up, so I thought I might as well'.

This incident occurred over a decade ago. The company I worked for at the time specialises in experiential learning. The activities used during leadership development events range from discrete 20-minute mental and/or physical games,

through climbing, sailing, and orienteering challenges, to full-blown expeditions in the great outdoors. As the programme referred to in the narrative above was run off-site at various hotel locations around the globe (that is, without access to ropes courses, boats, or the great outdoors), we used short, discrete experiential exercises to explore aspects of leading and leadership. The vivid moment of experience above played no small part in intensifying the doubt and disillusionment I was already experiencing in relation to mainstream conceptions of management and leadership and leadership development, and not long after this episode I left the company to join University of Hertfordshire (UH).

What I came to realise, and subsequently to explore in my doctoral research (Flinn, 2011), was the fact that for the first eight years of my career as a leader of leadership development (1998–2006), I had been unthinkingly 'spoon-feeding' (Raelin, 2009) participants the same mainstream conceptions of management, leadership, and organisation that I had been spoon-fed as a manager and student of management. In other words, I had been fronting programmes that had been designed by third parties (usually highly paid consultants and/or consultancies) which contained a great many of these abstract frameworks, models, and theories. Raelin calls this 'spoon-feeding', an approach where knowledge is seen as something 'tangible and permanent … [to be] … transferred from the mind of the knower into the mind of the current or future user' (ibid.: 402). Raelin, a lecturer in management education, contends that this practice 'is reinforced by the longstanding assumption that the role of the teacher is to rescue learners from their state of "not knowing"'(ibid.: 408).

Raelin contends that this 'empty vessel' approach to teaching persists because learning has become a commodity, and thus students and/or their parents expect teachers to pass on the knowledge that they possess and for which they are 'paying good money to procure' (2009: 408). He argues that this way of thinking/working is based on a 'representational model that parses management practice into a set of detached, predictable, and teachable categories that can capture and explain management in spite of its inherently messy, fluctuating, and accidental nature' (ibid.: 403). On the programmes that I was involved in during the early part of my career, the disparities between mainstream conceptions of how things *ought to be* (see Rodgers's Act 4 in Figure 3.1, Chapter 3) and the day-to-day reality of *how things are* (Rodgers's Act 1) were more often than not rationalised as something lacking in the participants, the 'system', or both. What was lacking was any form of critique. In my doctoral research (Flinn, 2011), I explore why this approach to corporate training persists, and why employers, once they had procured my services, did not seem to be interested in the content, just so long as the ratings on the 'happy sheets' were good (happy sheets being the evaluation questionnaires completed by participants at the end of a workshop/event/programme). Seemingly, happiness/satisfaction was their primary concern, and if learning happened along the way, then that was a bonus to be welcomed.

Returning to the narrative above, Clive's 'sheepishness' was influenced by his anticipation of the response that his '*Oh – I joined them for an hour*' gesture might

provoke. He knew that Lewis and I, influenced by the preceding history of gesture and response in previous iterations of this ongoing conversation, would know that the main reason that Clive attended the pool party was to ensure that he did nothing to jeopardise his happy sheet scores at the end of the week. The client organisation we ran the programme for/with set very high expectations for this 'flagship' programme. Faculty had to achieve an individual score of at least 4.6 out of 5 on the evaluation sheets completed by participants at the end of the programme. Those faculty members (host-partners from the client company included) who achieved scores above 4 but less than 4.6 would be 'talked to', and those receiving less than 4 would be invited to 'take a rest' from the programme. For Lewis and me, as permanent employees, being asked to 'take a rest' would not be pleasant, but other work would be found for us, whereas for associates, such as Clive, who were only contracted for this programme, it would mean loss of job/livelihood. Consequently, this was not the first time that Clive had engaged in unscheduled activities to ingratiate himself with participants. On the occasion described above, on hearing that Clive had attended the party, Lewis and I said nothing. There was nothing to say.

Many of the themes that I have been exploring in preceding chapters are present in this narrative – gesture/response, emergence, interdependence, power, inclusion/exclusion – but for me this incident reminds me of the effect (unintended consequence) that measurement, in the form of happy sheet scores (participant happiness), had on all involved in this programme. First, participant enjoyment (entertainment) became more important than participant learning (education), hence the use of the term 'edutainment' in the title of narrative.[1] And second, and more importantly, the pressure to maintain 'the numbers' led to a level of standardisation in the programme content that I found problematic. As part of my induction to the programme manager role, I was 'apprenticed' to the previous programme manager. This colleague's 'numbers' (happy sheet scores) were 'legendary'. He routinely achieved personal scores of 5 out of 5. He was (i) adept at playing the game, (ii) meticulous in his preparation/facilitation, and (iii) an outstanding master of ceremonies for 'Points'.

'Points' was part of the programme before my mentor became programme manager, but it is fair to say that he quickly made it his own. At the start of the programme, the 24 participants were split into six teams of four (two fours making up the eight that a pair of faculty worked with as a group during the week), with the six teams competing for points which were awarded by faculty. The points scored each day were announced to teams after dinner each evening and, and under the direction of my mentor, this had burgeoned from a quick 5-minute update to a 30-minute performance. At the end of the week, the team with the most points was awarded a prize. However, events were always engineered to ensure a two- or three-way tie between the teams, so that the tied teams had to perform 'skits' (sketches), with the eventual winning team being the one whose skit produced the most applause from the rest of the group. Invariably, we (the three faculty from my organisation) were invited to perform our own skit, and in this respect my mentor was in his element (a missed vocation, no doubt).

Performance carried over into his and our facilitation of the experiential exercises we used throughout the week-long programme, as a means of exploring leading and leadership. The exercises were a mix of physical, cerebral, and construction-type activities, or some combination thereof, lasting anywhere between 20 and 90 minutes. As part of my induction, my mentor provided me with a list of the lessons that 'had to be' generated from each exercise, and a script for the debrief that followed each activity. As mentioned above, my introduction and experience of development up to this point was to spoon-feed materials created by third parties, so I did not see anything unusual in what I was being presented with here. However, when I took over the management of the programme, I found this approach to be quite bizarre. For me, it was not so much the futility of determining the indeterminate; it was, moreover, the missed opportunities for learning if one stuck to the script.[2] I was a very successful programme manager, my 'numbers' averaged 4.7 and I was a big hit during 'Points', but there was little, if any, opportunity for personal/professional growth and the experience left me questioning the value of experiential exercises, especially where learning outcomes are chosen in advance. I saw the year out, but I had long before decided to leave.

Post-script

My mentor's praxis in relation to experiential exercises/learning, outlined in the narrative above, was not representative of the thinking/practice exhibited across the organisation. The way of working that emerged on that particular programme was influenced by many factors, not least the unintended consequences of focusing on the 'numbers'. Thankfully, I got to work on other programmes and my overall experience of my time there contributed greatly to my thinking practice and the company continues to do fantastic work.

Before looking at how taking a complexity approach to experiential activities had led to their repatriation in my thinking/practice, I want to explore some conventional (Gold *et al*., 2010: Carmichael *et al.*, 2011; and Dalton, 2010) and critical (Raelin, 2009, 2016) perspectives on the potential learning from small- and large-scale experiential activities.

Learning from experience(s)

Gold *et al*. argue that 'the value of experiential learning is the emergent sense-making that depends on the response and interpretation of managers to whatever is selected as experience. However, such interpretations are never neutral and are subject to the cultural, social, and political factors that provide part of the context for activity' (2010: 153). They further argue that if done well, 'exposure to challenging activities allows emotions to be revealed and new possibilities for action to be considered as critique of previous ways of working' (ibid.). Carmichael *et al*. focus on the subjective nature of experiential learning drawing on the thought of

John Dewey (1925) to argue that 'we all experience objects and events differently, since our previous experience and consequent interpretations of past events lead us to construct differing understandings of current or recent events – so learning is subjective or unique to the individual' (Carmichael *et al.*, 2011: 157).

Dalton argues that games and simulations 'with proper facilitation and discussion … are valuable for giving people an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the team process' (2010: 246). However, he also explores the disadvantages of such activities arguing that they 'can foster a misleading sense that ambiguous business conditions can be structured so that the right answer emerges' (ibid.). He concludes that 'to work, the games have to be related to clear learning objectives and participants need to be good at abstracting from reality, accepting the artificiality of the situation and imagining its relationship to real life' (ibid.).

Raelin echoes Dalton's criticism about the artificiality of games, arguing that simulated experience, 'be it from cases or from actual simulations such as in-box exercises, is just that – simulated, not real' (2009: 403). He acknowledges that such activities allow 'students to observe and discuss how others act in real situations, or to have them observe and discuss how they have acted under simulated conditions', but they falter as a 'holistic form of learning' as they do not 'take account of such real-time and relational contingencies such as unplanned disturbances, non-deliberate coping strategies, defensive routines, or just plain failures and surprises' (ibid.).

Outdoor management development/Outward Bound

> Outward Bound has found that using a proven methodology of experiential and theory-based learning, combined with the conscious use of metaphor, can build high-performing teams and leaders faster and more effectively than any other approach. Outward Bound's team-building programs strengthen organizational culture, accelerate organizational performance and improve results – results that may include profitability, market share and increased efficiency … or simply a more cheerful mood around the water cooler.
>
> *Raynolds et al. (2007: 225)*

Gold *et al*. (2010) touch on outdoor management development (OMD) describing it as a 'well-known form of experiential activity' that owes a great deal to 'military approaches' to development. They argue that although many organisations use OMD, there are doubts about the 'transfer of learning … back to work' (ibid.: 153). Again, they purport that this can be mitigated by the quality of facilitation arguing that if 'completed successfully' OMD can 'boost self-confidence' and instil 'a willingness to undertake even greater challenges' (ibid.). Dalton also explores OMD drawing similar conclusions to Gold *et al*. (2010) and arguing that the 'quality of the learning experience is likely to be proportionate to the quality of facilitation', signified for Dalton by staff who are 'experienced in outdoor activities'

and sufficiently 'psychologically skilled' to support participants through 'stressful experiences' in which they 'may feel vulnerable' (2010: 254). Dalton also argues that, done well, OMD can 'encourage entrepreneurial values of robustness, self-reliance, risk-taking and self-confident leadership' (ibid.: 253). He also questions whether the learning from OMD is 'transferable': 'The big problem with OMD is demonstrating that the emotionally stimulating learning derived from climbing rock faces really translates into improved working in the office on Monday morning' (ibid.: 254).

As I argued in the Introduction, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with games, simulations, and (live) case studies; their utility depends on the approach, focus of attention, and quality of the attendant and ongoing sense-making. I agree with Dalton, Gold *et al.* and Raelin, up to a point. The experiential games, simulations, and (live) case studies that one encounters on leadership development programmes cannot replicate the actual experience of interacting with the people with whom one works, but in my experience, both as a facilitator and as a manager-participant on leadership development programmes, this type of direct comparison is usually discouraged. However, I do agree that opportunities for useful learning can be missed, when such comparisons are made, and facilitators and learners avoid exploration of what is going on between them in the moment and/or oversimplify their lived experience to fit some idealistic model or framework, as Paul finds himself doing in the narrative that opens Chapter 3.

The anxiety-relieving effects of fun and false certainty

In my doctoral thesis (Flinn, 2011), I draw on the work of Gibson Burrell and Larry Hirschhorn, respectively, to argue that 'fun and the false certainty provided by idealised models and theories helps to relieve the anxieties of leaders who are struggling to cope with the complexities and uncertainties of their everyday life in organisations, this, in turn, helps to maintain stability and ensure that there is no challenge to the status quo' (Flinn, 2011: 46). At the time, I categorised this as coercive persuasion/corrective training with a kindlier face.

Hirschhorn (1995) argues that it does not really matter which theories and models are shared. He argues that almost anything will act as a 'transitional object' (after Winnicott, 1965) that has the potential of helping learners to make the transition from dependency to independence (Hirschhorn, 1995). He contends that the exploration of the relationship between the facilitator and participants on a leadership development programme offers a greater potential for learning than any of the models or theories that might be discussed, but that this is avoided due to the anxieties it might provoke. He argues that:

> [L]earning about management can itself promote significant anxiety … as managers find it hard to evaluate employees, confront peers, or correct superiors. Paradoxically management training frequently conceals and disguises this

> interpersonal dimension by offering managers a set of techniques and methods with which they can in fact bypass the interpersonal domain … Thus, management training functions as a social defense [against anxiety] at two distinct levels. It offers defensive techniques, and it functions itself as a mechanism for containing anxiety by in fact denying it.
>
> *Ibid.: 106*

This argument is echoed by Raelin who contends that teachers/facilitators 'collude in allaying learner anxiety by structuring the curriculum to minimize unexpected or anxiety-provoking occurrences and by controlling the class to prevent destabilizing dynamics' which might take the form of emotional outbursts or even silences (2009: 408). He argues that the 'last thing expected from teachers is to confront students with their own state of not knowing and to help them face the fears that such not knowing can produce', as to do so would be an 'abdication of one's responsibility as a teacher to meet students' dependency needs' (ibid.).

Taking a complexity approach to leadership development means problematising idealised models and theories of leadership and rather than covering over the complexities and uncertainties of everyday life in organisations, and shielding participants from anxiety-provoking affect, a complexity approach looks to support leader-managers to acknowledge and work with emotion (their own and that of others – see Chapters 4 and 5). Indeed, some of the most useful learning opportunities come from the exploration of what goes on within the group, among group members and between group members and the programme leader(s). The way in which I approach this in my practice, with the groups of leader-managers with whom I work, is discussed in more detail below.

Gibson Burrell, Professor in Organisational Theory at the University of Leicester, believes that the 1990s saw a return to the post-war search for the 'contented workforce' with organisational development attempting to use team-building days and Outward Bound-type activities to reintroduce pleasure into the organisation (Burrell in Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 86). In the string of measures that it is claimed will be enhanced should you engage in an Outward Bound activity (see the quotation above), it is interesting to note that the final potential benefit mentioned is a 'more cheerful mood around the water cooler' (Raynolds *et al*., 2007: 225). When I first started out in management development, in 1998, 'fun' was nearly always identified as a learning objective by participants and procurers alike. Twenty years on, not much has changed. 'Fun' is still one of the first objectives cited by procurers of development programmes when planning a workshop or away day. Indeed, only recently, 'fun' was one of the first objectives identified by a participant when asked what he or she wanted from the away day event that I was facilitating.

Since joining UH and taking a complexity approach to my work, the leadership development activities that I am responsible for are no longer 'off the shelf' programmes designed by third-party consultants, where the learning objectives/outcomes and content have been pre-empted and scripted in advance, rather they

are emergent learning opportunities shaped by me (sometimes with the help of colleagues) in collaboration with delegates as participatory members of the learning communities that we create together. What happens between us as a group is, by agreement, regarded as legitimate experience to explore and reflect upon (see Ava's narrative below). On the face of it, the structure and content are indistinguishable from conventional leadership development programmes, including engagement with the type of experiential exercise under discussion in this chapter. The difference lies in what we pay attention to and how this relates to our day-to-day experience. As a precursor to exploring the lessons that are often overlooked in conventional leadership development programmes, particularly in relation to the use of experiential exercises, I want to share with you a vignette from a colleague who has been taking a complexity approach in his practice. Sam Talucci is the President of Talucci Consulting Group and Senior Faculty at the National Outdoor Leadership School. Sam leads experiential activities that are at the extreme end of the spectrum, i.e., they are full-blown expeditions in the great outdoors.

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. Today it is Andres and Shane. 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 ft 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 ft.

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 students 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 were 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 [dead trees]. 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 ... what started to emerge for them was that decision making and communication are not linear ... 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 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 chose 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 ... 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 ... In the end, what ties this all together for me is paying attention to practice (the day-to-day interactions I am involved in) and method (how I think and make sense of the practice I am involved in).

Sam Talucci (2012)

Sam and his colleagues do not claim that the experiential exercises that they engage in on expeditions are in any way replications of the interactions that participants find themselves involved in back at work, even though they lead groups of leaders (including Navy SEALs and (forest) firefighters) that do actually find themselves in territories and situations similar to those found on the expeditions run by the National Outdoor Leadership School. No, they look to see what, if anything, is generalisable from the expedition experience to what participants find themselves doing in organisational settings, particularly in relation to their roles as leader-managers.

What strikes me about Sam's narrative is the focus and timing of the reflections/debriefs. The debriefs do not focus on whether the decisions taken were appropriate and/or in line with the rules/steps contained in the models and frameworks for decision-making that they had studied in the classroom, rather they concentrated on what was happening between group members and the programme leaders. And the debriefs take place not only after the event but also in the midst of the activity. This echoes the conceptions of 'reflection-on-action' and 'reflection-in-action' developed by Donald A. Schon in his seminal 1983 work, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. In his thesis, Sam draws on Schon and explores what for him are the similarities and differences between reflection 'in' and 'on' action and reflexivity and phronesis (Talucci, 2012).

Reflection is a major element of what is probably the most popular framework of experiential learning, Kolb's (2015) learning cycle – comprising concrete experience, reflection/observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. For Schon (1983), 'reflection-on-action' is reflection after the event and 'reflection-in-action' is reflection during the event. He describes reflection-in-action as a four-step process: routinised action, encounter of surprise, reflection, and new action (ibid.: 49–69). During the leadership development programmes that I lead, and particularly when we are engaging in experiential exercises, simulations, and (live) case studies, we do reflect both during and after a given activity; however, there are three significant differences between these conventional perspectives on experiential learning and reflection, and a complexity approach.

First, on conventional programmes, reflection is taken to mean introspection and Stacey describes this as 'reflecting on one's own thoughts and feelings and forming beliefs about one's own mental states' (2012: 111). This is often described as a form of stepping back and taking an objective view of one's experience. From the perspective of complex responsive processes, one cannot step outside of one's experiences to view them objectively nor understand one's actions in isolation from the social processes in which they emerge. Taking a complexity approach means accepting that the most we can do is become 'more detached in our involvement' (Elias, 1956) and pay attention to the interdependent patterns of interaction that we find ourselves caught up in. From the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, this type of reflection, as a form of sense-making, is a social phenomenon.

Second, in taking a complexity approach to leadership development I am looking to encourage reflexivity, that is, questioning our thinking. For Stacey, reflexivity 'is the activity of noticing and thinking about our participation together … how we have come to think as we do … the history of our traditions of thought' (2012: 111). This means moving from being a reflective practitioner to becoming a 'reflexive practitioner' (ibid.: 112). Stacey argues that reflexive practice goes beyond reflective practice because:

> It involves people in more than reflection together on what they are doing, and that more is inquiring into how they are thinking about what they are doing. It involves asking ourselves who we are, what are we doing together, why are we doing it and how are we thinking about all of these questions.
>
> *Ibid.*

And third, taking a complexity approach to experience and reflection means rather than waiting for a surprise or for something out of the ordinary to occur, we take time out to reflect and be reflexive as a matter of routine. As outlined in Chapter 3, reflection/reflexivity is not something that should only happen as a result of difference and/or disruption; what I am calling reflective curiosity (the amalgamation of sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement) is something we should initiate even when things seem to be going swimmingly.

Raelin argues that management educators have done little to embrace 'practice-based and critical approaches' preferring instead to stick with the 'promotion of reductionist and mythological active learning strategies which, though useful, are unlikely to lead to the acquisition of prudential wisdom' (2009: 401). In a recent article, he argues that classroom learning is not 'apt preparation for the practice of management' (ibid., 2016) and calls for more work-based learning:

> Compared to traditional classroom learning often delivered in off-site settings, work-based learning summons participants to live engagements during which they can reflect on their experience so as to expand and create knowledge while at the same time improve their practice. Accordingly, they develop particular habits and attitudes that give rise to an adoption and appreciation of leadership as a collective practice.
>
> *Ibid.: 43*

In his description of work-based learning, Raelin includes things like action learning (see Chapter 7) and coaching (see Chapter 4). He does not dismiss classroom learning or experiential exercises out of hand:

> This is not to suggest that being exposed to simulated experiential activities solving problems in a classroom setting is inopportune. Classroom learning of this experiential nature can be preparatory for the ultimate application of the

> desired metacognitive critical skills in naturalistic settings. However, work-based learning sees the location of learning as shifting from a single place to the sites of collective practice.
>
> *(2016: 46)*

If I understand Raelin correctly, his argument goes something like this: didactic classroom experiences are not the most effective way of preparing participants for the messy, politically charged, contingent, social/collective, and relational practice of leading/leadership, so instead of engaging in abstract activities such as experiential exercises and simulations, management educators would be better served by employing activities such as action learning and coaching. And my response, which by now you might be able to anticipate, is that it depends on the approach, focus of attention and quality of the attendant, and ongoing sense-making. Coaching and action learning, centred on heroic, individualistic, and idealistic conceptions of leadership can also be experienced as abstract and instrumental (see Chapters 4 and 7) and simulations (see Chapter 5) and experiential exercises can be experienced as powerful opportunities for the development of awareness of self in and with relation to others and the enhancement of the capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement.

If I had been writing this chapter immediately after my experience of experiential exercises on the programme described in the narrative that opens this chapter, and previously, then I would have found it difficult to disagree with Raelin's challenge to their efficacy. However, since taking a complexity approach to leadership development, these activities have witnessed a reprieve, partly not only due to the change in approach/focus outlined above but also because of the quality of reflection and reflexivity that participants on making sense of leading (MSOL) have exhibited both during the programme as a group and after in the reflective narrative accounts of experience they have written as part of the assessment for accreditation.

Here's a rejoinder from Sam; a reflection on his current thinking for the second edition.

In rereading the excerpt that Kevin chose, I was immediately back in the California coastal range of Big Sur.

What Kevin takes up is the focus on reflections /debriefs, which is a salient part of the narrative and was the central theme of that narrative. What strikes me about the narrative today is the iteration of practice. Practice meaning our daily activities. The cadence of our daily activities as Faculty allows or hampers the emergence of learning by the participants. It is our own involvement in reflection/debriefing and paying attention to how we and others are participating. It is our own involvement and detachment that allows us to examine our practice and the resulting outcome.

My current reflections and actions with students and leadership coaching clients are about our daily activities. How can we pay attention to our daily activities and the resulting outcomes by using the techniques of reflection, debriefing, coaching, and consulting? Dewey describes experiential learning as paying attention to our daily activities. Recently I was advising a colleague at the school I work with and wanted to illustrate this idea of paying attention to our practice:

> *The essence of leading/managing is in our daily activities/our practice; it is in executing the mundane that excellence emerges - responding to correspondence, responding to phone messages within a prescribed time, and actually answering the phone. A great expedition attends to well-pitched shelters, drying and maintaining your gear, well-cooked meals, and keeping track of your kit, all seemingly very mundane tasks, yet when executed well daily, it offers the possibility of excellence emerging.*

This is nothing new; rather, it is our lack of attention to our daily activities that might make this appear new and novel. In 1982, Peters and Waterman (1982) wrote In Search of Excellence. Excellence in the narratives emerges out of the mundane – clean washrooms, calling your business, and customer contact moments. What they are illustrating is this attentiveness to practice and how it reveals itself in different industries.

This narrative is relevant and crisp today as it was when I wrote it and has offered me new insights and reflection. My work today with clients on practice was emerging in this narrative 15 years ago.

Experiential exercises reprieved

> The magic of stories is that the more specific you are, the more universal they seem to get.
>
> *Frank Cottrell Boyce, screenwriter and novelist (2008)*

As previously stated, I am not trying to convince you that experiential exercises should be part of the development programmes that you might be(come) involved in. I am simply exploring what taking a complexity approach looks like for me and the participants with whom I work.

However, before doing so, I feel it is important to point out three things. First, experiential exercises only take up a fraction of the 12 days that comprise MSOL. Second, the longitudinal nature of the programme means that participants have time to build relationships which increases the potential for the interactions following these exercises to be supportive and challenging, reflective, reflexive, honest,

and insightful. And third, MSOL also involves variations of the work-based learning technologies that Raelin calls for – coaching, action learning, project work – and, for those participants completing the assessment element of the programme required for accreditation, reflective writing.

I want to open up the exploration of a complexity approach to experiential exercises (simulations and [live] case studies) by sharing two of the reflections written by MSOL participants following their separate engagement with one such activity on MSOL. A third narrative will be shared later in the chapter to illustrate how our interactions as a group figure in the learning. After each workshop, participants are invited to write up to 500 words reflecting on something that struck them during the session. These are first-person narrative accounts of experience. Participants are expected to explore why this theme/incident/vivid moment of experience seems important, any parallels with their day-to-day practice, and what influence, if any, this is having or might have on their thinking/practice. All three of the narratives below have been submitted in partial fulfilment of the assessment required for accreditation. Successful students are awarded a postgraduate certificate in Business and Management from the Business School at UH. I have chosen narratives written by participants on MSOL during 2016/2017, all of whom are line managers at the University. One is a recent graduate, another has just completed the programme and is in the process of pulling together a portfolio of work for accreditation, and the third had just started out on the programme. They have each given me their permission to share their reflections verbatim, with some of the names being changed to protect anonymity.

Intensifying learning through reflective narrative writing: Chris, Tori, and Ava

Chris and Tori's reflections were sparked by their separate experiences of leading an activity called Shoestring Theatre, an exercise that we engage with early in the programme. I have also included Chris's rejoinder, following his involvement in an exercise exploring creativity and collaboration a few months later, as an excellent example of reflexivity.

Chris's narrative

> In nominating myself for the third leadership task that day, I was allocated directing the Shoestring Theatre Company's production of 3 short scenes from a play/show with a preparation/rehearsal time of 30 minutes. I was out of my comfort zone but was helped somewhat by the fact that everyone in my team was also out of their comfort zone. What I noticed about myself from the experience of going through those 30 minutes was that I ended up being very directive and feeling comfortable inhabiting this place. I told myself that I was doing this to avoid chaos when delivering the 3 short scenes to the rest of [the] group.

Another (more critical) voice inside me was providing a different narrative – i.e., that I was only 'paying lip service' to the idea of leadership and that really I felt most at ease telling others what to do, and that I was then 'massaging' this stance by subsequently asking individuals 'how does that sound to you?'

With some additional time to reflect on the experience, I can allow some compassion for myself and see a bigger picture (although my critical voice can still be heard, murmuring that this is 'letting myself off the hook'). I came up with good ideas – to use humour to reduce anxiety among the cast and to engage the audience/to use a narrator for each of the scenes to guide the process/to give people choice around which plays/shows to present/to give people choice around roles and to equally participate myself/to manage time and to provide momentum and containment. The experience also reconfirmed to me that leadership is not the exclusive preserve of 'heroic' figures and that I can carry out leadership tasks.

Excerpt from Chris's reflection following a later session on creativity:

A final point … the module on creativity 'worked' for me because on the day it enabled me to come up with a new insight about myself that startled me: I went beyond where my thinking has often taken me before ('the quality I need to develop is courage') to a different place internally … 'what if I didn't minimise other people's points of view that I don't agree with?'

Thinking this thought represents a place of creativity – a departure point to doing things differently. I am asking myself to be more expansive, to not reduce issues so readily to the black and white but to tolerate the shades of grey that represent not knowing and compromise.

Tori's narrative

For this week's learning log, I would like to reflect on a particular challenge of leadership: leading a team when you as the leader are hesitant about, or perhaps even strongly opposed to, the task at hand. I have chosen this subject because during our leadership exercises in Module 2, I had to lead the Shoestring Theatre exercise. This was a task which was not at all comfortable for me, but perhaps even worse my whole team felt the same.

After the exercise, we as a group reflected on what would be the best approach as a leader in these situations. Do you pretend to be fully engaged and enthusiastic about the project, in the hope that enthusiasm is infectious? Or do you admit freely that you are as troubled with the task as they are, in the hope that honesty breeds trust? During the Shoestring Theatre exercise, I took the latter approach. I admitted freely that I was uncomfortable with the task, but it had to be done and we were all in it together. Fortunately, in this situation, the approach worked and we all engaged fully in the task (and if we're honest actually enjoyed it a

little!). The end result may not have been a work of art, but the process of teamwork, commitment and collaboration was in itself a triumph.

This situation was a bit of fun and my approach fortunately paid off. But the task did get me thinking, what happens when the task at hand isn't a bit of fun? When the task is highly arduous, or the implications distressing? What happens if your chosen approach as a leader backfires?

In my day-to-day work, my team is required to act in accordance with government funding regulations, and this means that we regularly have to make difficult decisions about a student's funding entitlement. The decisions that we make can have major implications for a student's financial situation, their ability to stay at university, and consequently their whole future. When I introduce this responsibility to a new starter in the team, the response is always one of extreme unease. How can we, in just doing our job, be responsible for making such decisive decisions, with such potentially distressing implications? As a team leader, I struggle with the responsibility myself, and therefore struggle to ratify the responsibility to my team. However, the responsibility is one that I cannot shirk, and essentially this is what I say to my team. I have always taken the approach of being honest about my misgivings. Taking any other approach in this situation would make me seem unfeeling and callous, and I don't believe that this is the way to earn the respect of your team (which I'm not suggesting is imperative for every leader, but it certainly is for me). So I suppose my reflection this week is about the importance for me of taking an honest approach to leadership – of being honest with my team and honest with myself. If I lead with honesty, the end result may not be one that I am entirely content with, but I will always be content with myself.

On MSOL, we take opportunities to reflect during (reflection-in-action) and after (reflection-on-action) the exercises we engage in. This often takes the form of a time-out amid the activity, a way of inviting the participants to reflect and explore what is going on for them in relation to and with others, and/or exploring what parallels there might be between what is happening in the moment and their experiences in other settings. From a complexity perspective, I am looking to encourage leader-managers to become more detached in their involvement, literally in this case, with a view to exhibiting how they might more consciously do this during the games that they find themselves caught up in on a day-to-day basis (see Chapter 3).

Eric Dunning, a colleague of Norbert Elias when they worked together in the sociology department at the University of Leicester, and Jason Hughes argue that a 'detour via detachment' (Elias, 1956) 'can lay the foundations for a process of "secondary involvement", for returning to a more "involved" position in which – if the detour has been successful – armed with potentially *more* reliable, *more* reality congruent or *more* "object-adequate" knowledge …[one] will have the potential to intervene in the social world in a manner that has more intended relative to unintended consequences than would be possible hitherto' (Dunning and Hughes,

2013: 13; emphasis in the original). What I take from this is how important it is for leader-managers to do all they can to maintain awareness of how things are (the operational realities), recognising that this becomes more and more difficult the bigger and more complex an organisation becomes and the higher one rises in the corporate hierarchy. However, it is also important to remember from a complexity perspective that (i) one might reduce the unintended consequences but never eradicate them; (ii) some unintended consequences might turn out to be welcome; and (iii) 'small differences can escalate into major, completely unpredictable changes, so creating new forms and destroying others at the same time' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 297). Becoming more detached in our involvement also allows us to be reflexive about the ideologies that are influencing our interactions. That is, we can ask questions about how we have come to think that a leader should not tell others what to do/be strong, etc. And we can explore whether these ways of thinking are serving us well or not.

I contend that some of the claims that Raelin makes for practice-based learning are accessible in classroom simulations in which 'planned engagement and collective reflection on that experience can expand and even create knowledge while at the same time serving to improve practice' (Raelin, 2009: 402). The above narratives illustrate the potential for experiential exercises to provide vivid moments of experience (Shaw, 2010) that can act as catalysts for collective sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement. In these instances, learning/knowledge cannot be predetermined in advance, rather it is co-created (see Chapter 5) in iterative processes of reflection and sense-making. Additionally, reflective narrative writing encourages the type of reflexive curiosity that is exhibited by both Chris and Tori in the narratives above. During their experience of leading this experiential exercise 'in the classroom', they are each confronted by their own thinking (ideology) in relation to what it means to lead. 'Through the interplay between action and feedback, learners acquire more valid social knowledge, more effective social action, and greater alignment among self-knowledge, knowledge-of-other, and action' (Raelin, 2009: 46).

On MSOL, in addition to the short discrete exercises, like the one that Chris and Tori reflect on in their narratives, the simulated conversations explored in Chapter 5, and the 'All Change exercise' outlined in Chapter 3, we also explore collaboration and improvisation with the help of poetry and engage in a significant post-programme community project as a programme finale (mentioned in Ava's narrative below). On Leading through Coaching (LTC), we have worked with dance, music, and t'ai chi. I do not want to overplay the usefulness of experiential exercises, simulations, and (live) case studies (see 'Reflections' below), but in taking a complexity approach I find them to be useful triggers for the reflexivity that participants exhibit both on the programme and in their reflective narrative accounts following the workshops. As briefly mentioned above, in addition to these structured and planned activities, we also take seriously what transpires between us as a group – not only what happens between the participants themselves but also between the participants and me as programme leader (see Chapters 7 and 8).

As participants get used to exploring what is happening between us during experiential exercises and realise how valuable this can be in MSOL, they become more comfortable reflecting more generally on our interactions in the classroom, and vice versa. The one feeds the other, enabling the exploration of our similarities and differences in thinking and approach.

In their article entitled 'Learning from Difference', Reynolds and Trehan argue that 'learning from difference is to be encouraged because the experiences of difference in the classroom will probably have their counterpart in working and managing within organizations' (2003: 177). However, they caution against not trying to resolve differences overtly or covertly as they arise, but rather to learn from them (ibid.: 177). Taking a complexity approach means drawing attention to the relations of power and the patterns that are emerging in the game. It also means accepting the asymmetry in power relations between me as programme leader and the leader-managers on the programme. This is not always comfortable for me or the participants, as illustrated by Ava's narrative, below.

Ava's narrative

I am not good with endings and so I was apprehensive about the last session. Beforehand, I had been thinking about the individuals I have been studying with on this course, over the past ten months, and how I could thank them for helping me to develop my own leadership, from working with and among them, as well as through their shared experiences during our 'community meetings'.

On entry to the room, I was disappointed by a series of little changes to the session which included: some group members were not able to attend the session (change of people); our community meeting would be at the end of the day (change of time) and the session would be led by Helen not Kevin (change of teacher). Normally, these three changes would not have affected me but at this last session, they seemed to have an impact. Why?

As the session on planning our community project advanced, I realised that I was upset about the imminent loss of community – the group community, the learning community and most importantly the 'community meetings'.

On reflection, I understand that the 'community' on this course represented much more than sitting with other people and having a chat for me. It came to represent an important space where I, or others in the group, could have meaningful conversations, listen without judgement, and offer support without the usual barriers of job role, position at UH and wage bracket. In this arena, I was able to talk freely and share feelings about frustrations or celebrations in my day-to-day management.

I am reminded of an early session on the course where we had to draw our leadership style. I found myself drawing a CND sign, with wings and in the centre of the

> piece was a safety net. The piece was my attempt at creating of a safe place for my team to try out new ideas and not be afraid to fail. Interestingly, I think the place I have been trying to create for my team has been slowly developing around me through this leadership journey, in the emerging community spirit of the group. From the early stages where we agreed the boundaries of the group, I feel that we developed our own safe environment to express ourselves, develop, grow, share ideas, emotions and most importantly, work together.
>
> So, as it turns out, I do not need to thank my colleagues just yet, as we will be working together on our community project for the next six months. Instead, I can continue to contemplate how best to describe the sense of belonging and empowerment I have been left with, from the community spirit we created.

The community project referred to is the (live) case study that participants complete at the end of the programme. The term 'live' is used to differentiate experiential, real-time activities from the typical, type-written case studies employed in conventional leadership development programmes. In the Introduction, I noted that what I find myself doing in my own practice with those I work with, in the contexts in which I operate, is not something that you can take and apply to the contexts in which you work with the people with whom you find yourself interacting. The same argument applies to the abstract, impression-managed, 'best practice' case studies beloved of traditional business schools.

Pierre Bourdieu conceptualises the contexts that we find ourselves in – the 'series of institutions, rules, conventions, categories, appointments, and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discoveries and activities' – as 'cultural fields' (Webb *et al.*, 2002: 21–22). One's status in a field is partly dependent on the 'cultural capital' we have accumulated. Cultural capital being 'a form of value associated with culturally authorised tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills, and awards. Within the field of education, for example, an academic degree constitutes cultural capital' (ibid.: x). Bourdieu also uses the term *habitus*, to denote 'the values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that generally stay with us across contexts [fields] … These values and dispositions allow us to respond to cultural rules and contexts in a variety of ways (because they allow for improvisations), but the responses are always largely determined – regulated – by where (and who) we have been in a culture' (ibid.: 36). Bourdieu identifies three forms of social capital: (i) economic (material wealth in the form of money, stocks and shares, property, etc.); (ii) cultural (knowledge, skills, education, qualifications, etc.); and (iii) symbolic (status, prestige, etc.) (1982: 14). Thus, to gain and maintain a position of influence within a given field, one must accumulate the relevant economic, cultural, and symbolic capital (Flinn, 2011).

Bourdieu's conceptions of capital and field are useful in making sense of the contexts and communities in which we find ourselves, that is, the interdependent mix of values, norms, beliefs, power relations, and ways of thinking that constitute local communicative interaction. In the narrative above, Ava points to the sense of

safety she feels 'without the usual barriers of job role, position at UH and wage bracket'. This gives her the confidence to 'talk freely and share feelings about frustrations or celebrations in my day-to-day management'. Reflecting on our interactions as a learning community, the 'game that is MSOL', throws into relief the other games that we are caught up in at the university and which forms of social capital might give players an advantage in the game. Who gets to speak first and/or the most? Who doesn't? Who gets listened to, and who gets ignored? Who do I, as programme leader, seem to favour? As shown above, becoming more detached in our involvement, noticing the patterns that are just emerging and being able to anticipate the next couple of steps, might give you some advantage in the game. Similarly, awareness of what and how social capital confers advantage in the game might give one enough information to plan one's next moves or to challenge the game in the knowledge that challenging the game might lead to one's exclusion.

Michel de Certeau (1984) carried out an analysis of Bourdieu's own political adroitness, which he describes as Bourdieu's 'strategic moves' in the 'scholarly game' of academia. From this, he generalised 'three aspects of strategic thinking' that contribute to a player's 'cultural literacy':

- a self-reflexive understanding of the person's own position and resources within the field(s) or institution(s) in which they are operating
- an awareness of the rules, regulations, values and cultural capital (both official and unofficial) which characterise the field of activity
- an ability to manoeuvre as best as possible, given the handicaps associated with, for instance, a lack of … capital.

Ibid.: 57

Crozier and Friedberg (1980) also adduce game models to make sense of organisations. They argue that power relations are 'inevitable', and this means that we must continue to live in a world of conflict, manipulation, and ambiguity because '*no society can rely on its supposed virtuousness to insure harmony*' (1980: 248; emphasis in the original). They argue that individual agency is not sufficient to cause a significant shift in the power differential. They contend that the only way to bring about equity is to develop more leaders:

> A greater number of persons must be allowed to join in the game. They must be granted a greater autonomy, freedom, and range of options. Only power can fight power. The greater threat of abuse comes not from allowing an actor to take initiatives, but rather from suppressing the freedom to do so in order to restrict all initiative to a monopoly of certain actors or higher authorities.
>
> *Ibid.: 248*

Echoing Crozier and Friedberg, de Haan and Kasozi argue that it is 'where many can be involved in leadership that better decisions are made, where the positive

impact of decisions is greater, and the excesses and extravagance of leadership are avoided' (2014: 3). A more modest way to cause a shift in power relations, then, is to invite as many people as is usefully possible to join the decision-making process.

Reflections

Exploration of events that happen in the classroom, whether simulated or not, can help to enhance the development of reflexive curiosity – the capacities of sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement (see Chapter 8). This supports the development of the cultural literacy/feel for the game required to play and/or challenge it more skilfully. Of course, useful lessons will not always materialise, and some exercises will fall flat, irrespective of the quality of the reflection. At UH, we still ask participants to complete programme evaluations (happy sheets), and for the experiential exercises we use on MSOL, we ask participants to rate learning and enjoyment separately. As one would anticipate, opinions vary with responses against each activity ranging from high enjoyment/low learning, through low enjoyment/high learning, to high enjoyment/high learning. As noted above, the longitudinal nature of the programme and the development of what Ava refers to above as a 'safe space' contributes to the engagement in and subsequent usefulness of experiential exercises, yet not everyone is able or inclined to commit to programmes comprising 12 days (as both MSOL and LTC currently do). In the next chapter, I explore what I have been doing to accommodate participants who fall into this category and take a reflexively curious look at action learning (Revans, 1980).

Notes

1 There are obvious parallels here with the commodification of higher education that Raelin (2009) describes above, but that will have to wait for another time.
2 To this day, when asked what the learning objectives and/or outcomes will be for the programmes I am involved in (which happens often in higher education institutions), I usually respond that I have absolutely no idea what people will learn, but I can tell you about the themes we might explore.

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7

ACTION LEARNING SETS

Introduction

I have been creating spaces for 'skilful group discussion' (Thornton, 2016: 6), where groups and teams come together to make sense of what they find themselves doing in organisational settings, for almost two decades now. And as I reflect upon what I have been doing, as a facilitator of these spaces/sessions during my career, it is tempting to split the development of my thinking/practice into three very neat phases – before, during, and after the DMan. However, this would merely be a convenient post-rationalisation of what was a much more fragmented and fragmentary development process. A more accurate description is that for many years I have been endeavouring to help individuals, groups, and teams to think together, and over the last decade, I have found myself exploring and experimenting with group analytic thinking/practice with a view to doing this in a more 'skilful' way.

In this chapter, I explore my current thinking/practice in relation to working with groups and teams by comparing it to my former praxis, centred as it was around action learning (Revans, 1980). However, rather than problematising the use of action learning in leadership development, I contend that (i) there are more similarities than differences between the complexity approach and Revans' original philosophy, and (ii) that action learning has its place. Following an introduction to action learning sets and Revans' thinking, I share a series of reflective narrative accounts of my experience tracing the development of my thinking in relation to group analytic ways of working with groups, interspersed with a vignette from a colleague who is also taking a complexity approach to working with groups.

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Action learning sets

> The central idea of this approach to human development, at all levels, in all cultures and for all purposes, is today that of the set, or small group of comrades in adversity, striving to learn with and from each other as they confess their failures and expand upon their victories.
>
> *Reg Revans (1980: 16)*

Following modest beginnings as a development intervention for managers at the British Coal Board in the 1940s, action learning and action learning sets (Revans, 1980), and/or some variations thereof, have become a ubiquitous element on leadership development programmes around the world. I was first introduced to action learning as a young manager and then again as a less young facilitator. The quality and usefulness of the conversations, both as a participant and a facilitator, varied wildly. Action learning was most useful when participants and facilitators kept to the principle of asking the presenter questions to open up their thinking, helping them to consider different perspectives and alternative understandings of their day-to-day experience. It was less useful when participants and facilitators offered instrumental solutions to the intractable problems that presenters often brought.

Gold *et al*. (2010), Carmichael *et al*. (2011), and Dalton (2010) all provide standard descriptions of action learning as 'one of the most powerful methods of development to emerge from the 1970s and 1980s' (ibid.: 212). All three offer case studies and describe action learning as a process through which groups of managers agree to 'meet over a period of time … to help each other by asking questions, discussion, exposure to critical comment … reflection and action planning' (Gold *et al*., 2010: 194). All three caution against the variability of practice and process as well as the 'tendency for it to be seen as a panacea for all manner of development problems' (Dalton, 2010: 216). Carmichael *et al.* (2011) reflect that it has gone in and out of fashion over the years putting its lack of consistent sticking power down to it not being seen as a good fit in 'command and control' cultures where 'it may be seen as too soft for the rigours of macho-oriented business managers' (ibid.: 227). Both Dalton (2010) and Gold *et al*. (2010) draw attention to the recent interest in more critical approaches to action learning 'which makes more explicit the tensions, power dynamics, emotions and dominance factors' in the set and the wider organisation (ibid.: 196).

Following the same process that I have sought to model in previous chapters, for this intervention, that is, going back to the source of the ideology, perspective, tool, or technique under review and comparing conventional applications with my way of working, I was taken aback. Revans' original hypothesis, that if 'one learns best from whatever it is that one may be trying to do [then one] can learn to do it better by the very act of thinking how they do it' (1980: 7), really resonated. For Revans,

action learning works on the principle that the most effective thing a manager can do is to reflect on his/her day-to-day experience:

> Action learning suggests that, since he has to do this in any case, he might just as well find out how he is doing it at that moment and, with what he discovers, try to do it a little better the next day, or next week, or even next year.
>
> *Ibid.: 251–252*

I am pushing it a little, but I don't think that I am overplaying it when I say that Revans' approach – taking experience seriously; sharing narratives of practice in a learning community; making sense of what might be going on; deciding on a next step – is not a million miles away from what I find myself doing when working with groups of managers. Indeed, if I count 'taking experience seriously' as the first similarity between Revans' original thinking and my current practice, then for me, there are three more major similarities and one stark difference. The second similarity stems from the fact that Revans is evangelical in his conviction that management is not a science. In one publication (Revans, 1980), he quotes extensively from an article by Badawy, who argues that:

> The accumulated evidence suggests that management education is in trouble … Management education is largely based on theoretical, neat and unrealistic models of administrative behaviour. It does not deal with the realities of organisational life. Management graduates, as a result, are mired in the code of rationality.
>
> *(1978: 75)*[1]

The third similarity is that Revans believes that many of the problems that we encounter as managers are not technical but relational, and they reflect the power relations in play:

> [T]he problems central to the pits … were not those of mining technology but of the relations of management and worker. My own belief … is that these relations will be improved by action learning in which all in the pit work together on the identification, analysis and treatment of their common problems.
>
> *(1980: 17–18)*

The fourth and final major similarity between Revans' perspective and a complexity approach is that he contends that it is impossible to influence much beyond the local patterns of interaction that constitute our working relationships. His experience of working within the coal industry convinced him that 'beyond such-and-such a size, pits become unmanageable. Little that we understand very clearly can be done to make an efficient or happy unit out of one that is already too large' (ibid.: 20–21).

And the stark difference? Interestingly, Revans is quite dismissive of groups expending time and energy reflecting on group dynamics, which is one of the things that I am arguing is of fundamental importance. Under the heading 'Group Dynamics and Other Task-Free Exercises', Revans expresses his concern that explorations of group dynamics might divert attention away from the primary task of action learning, that is, identifying and taking action back in the workplace:

> Indeed, in very recent years, there is now the chance that what had been developed as action learning, a consortium of top managers regularly meeting to discuss among themselves the effect of trying out their interpretations of reality back upon the reality itself, may now revert to mere group discussion unverified by subsequent real world comparison.
>
> *(2011: 82)*

He not only acknowledges that group dynamics 'aimed at trying to demonstrate to others who they imagine themselves to be, why they say the things they say and act the things they act' can be helpful to managers but also argues that 'it is quite fanciful to imagine that this new understanding also equips them to master the imperious demands of external and objective responsibility' (ibid.: 83). He further cautions that:

> We must be wary, now that action learning seems to gain acceptance, that the set is not cut off from reality, sold as a part-time discussion group of four or five top managers meeting to exchange their unverified misconceptions as to what may be going on under their command.
>
> *Ibid.: 69*

If you have read the preceding chapters of this book, it should come as no surprise that a complexity approach to leadership and leadership development involves taking group dynamics seriously. In other words, if one accepts that organisations are not systems, but patterns of human interaction, whereby global patterns emerge (are formed while simultaneously forming) in the many local interactions in which phenomena such as leadership are co-created, then an understanding of 'what else might be going on here?' might prove to be very useful. I see Revans' ambivalence as a defence against the anxiety provoked by what he perceives as a threat to the integrity of the action learning process. However, as explored below, Revans' concern that interventions like this might lead to sets becoming little more than 'part-time discussion group[s]' does strike a chord with me. In the remainder of this chapter, I trace the development of my thinking in relation to action learning/working with groups with a view to exploring the influence of group analytic thinking on my practice and identifying the elements of therapeutic thinking and practice that are useful in organisational settings.

From learning reviews to community meetings

As outlined in Chapter 2, during the first year of my doctoral studies, I was introduced to a research method and way of working that is greatly influenced by group analytic thinking and practice. Indeed, the DMan was originally developed as an informal collaboration between University of Hertfordshire (UH) and the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) in the UK. Group analysis is a form of group psychotherapy developed by S. H. Foulkes in the 1940s. Foulkes, a qualified psychoanalyst, had been accustomed to working with patients on a one-to-one basis. However, during the Second World War, building on earlier experiments with groups at his private practice in Exeter, Foulkes worked with groups of traumatised servicemen to explore the therapeutic value of bringing individuals who had been through similar experiences together to support each other's recovery (Flinn, 2022 – see Chapter 8). At the DMan quarterly, residential weekends we worked in either small groups, learning sets, or as a whole group, in Community Meetings. My learning set (and doctoral research) was supported by two supervisors (one of whom is a trained group analyst) and the whole group Community Meetings were supported by all five members of faculty (which included another qualified group analyst).

The tangible differences between the group work that I had been exposed to on previous leadership development programmes and those of the DMan – starting and ending *exactly* on time, exploring the emotions that were manifest (as well as some that were not), and routinely exploring our answers to the question 'What else might be going on here?' – left me both confused and intrigued. In 2009, to gain a better understanding of this psychodynamic approach to working with groups, I joined an experiential group at the IGA. This experience did not provide all of the answers that I sought, but it did give me the confidence to start to work differently with the groups of managers whom I was working with on making sense of leading (MSOL), and to develop a new programme for senior managers, Leadership Experience Groups (LEGs), in collaboration with Professors Ralph Stacey (a qualified group analyst) and Chris Mowles.

MSOL workshops are held monthly[2] and each of the ten workshops explores a particular theme. Themes include MSOL … Yourself, Teams, the Staff Experience, the Student Experience, Creativity, and Change. As my thinking/practice shifted, influenced by experience on the DMan and in the experiential group, I changed the title of the session that opened each workshop from Learning Review to Community Meeting. Learning Reviews had become little more than a ritual opportunity for participants to shame each other for not having 'found the time to apply any of the learning from the previous workshop'. I wanted the Community Meeting to be a space where participants could share their experiences and experience of leading at UH. Thus, this mirrored the process that I encountered on the DMan, where the structure of the Community Meeting would emerge during the ebb and flow of conversation, in the absence of any agenda.

From Community Meetings to Leadership Experience Groups

In 2009, I was tasked with putting together a development programme for the senior management team at UH. The senior team at the time was a mix of academic (Vice Chancellor, Pro Vice Chancellors, Deans of Faculty, Heads of School) and professional managers (directors of professional service departments, for example, Human Resources and Finance). My experiences on the DMan, the IGA experiential group, and MSOL gave me sufficient confidence to suggest to the Vice Chancellor that Professors Ralph Stacey and Chris Mowles should be involved in the development of the programme. The Vice Chancellor agreed and Ralph and Chris were intrigued enough to accept the opportunity of working with colleagues in their own institution in a somewhat unconventional way. We developed something we called LEGs. Each group was made up of six managers and a convenor. The convenors were Ralph, Chris, two other colleagues from the business school, who were not involved in the DMan but who were advocates of the way of working, and me.

The purpose of the groups was to provide an opportunity for methodically exploring what it means to lead, by engaging in ongoing, reflective conversations about their experience and experiences of leading at UH. Each group met once a quarter for a period of 18 months. Prior to the first meeting, participants were sent a document explaining what an LEG is not, along with a description of the role of the convenor.

The following excerpt from the introductory email sent to participants ahead of their upcoming conference gives a flavour of my/our intent:

What a Leadership Experience Group is not:

- It is not a 'talking shop', although conversation will be at its core.
- It is not an action learning set, although each member will have the opportunity to discuss what is currently important to them in their role.
- It is not intended to produce action plans, although actions will inevitably follow.

The role of the convenor:

- The convenor is a participant in the discussion. His/her role is not to guide, or input. It is for this reason that we have avoided calling them facilitators. What the convenor will bring will be difference, an outside view, and some structure to the sessions. There will be one convenor per group, and each group will have a different convenor.[3]

Considering the focus of this chapter, it is interesting to note (and to be reacquainted with) my unequivocal insistence that an LEG is *not* an action learning set.

These early forays into working with groups in a different way left me simultaneously disappointed and hopeful. Disappointed by my failure to encourage some

group members to explore anything other than simplistic, cause and effect fixes and solutions to what were, on the whole, intractable problems. And hopeful because I glimpsed the transformative potential that groups have for helping each other become more aware of (i) themselves in relation to others, (ii) the interdependent nature of their involvement in the activities they undertake in work settings, and (iii) the need for more nuanced thinking about how to navigate the paradoxical situations and highly charged political landscapes they find themselves in.[4]

LEGs ran for 18 months before winding down when two of the five convenors retired (or more accurately in Ralph's case, semi-retired). It would be fair to say that some participants really valued the space and still talk about LEGs to this day, others thought they were useful for engaging with colleagues in a different way/context and we never found out what the remainder thought of them, but as they had already voted with their feet and stopped attending some months before the programme ended, one can guess. Community Meetings on MSOL continue apace, and it was the overwhelming appreciation for this space, expressed by current and past MSOL participants, that led me to further explore group analytic ways of working. I completed the IGA's National Foundation Course in Group Analysis in 2014, and in 2015, I enrolled on its inaugural Diploma in Reflective Organisational Practice programme and following graduation this year I joined its inaugural Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organisations and Society programme.

As explained in the Introduction, by cataloguing the various development programmes that I have and will be involved in, I hope to illustrate that I have engaged with and taken seriously the perspectives and disciplines that I explore in these pages. In this chapter, I examine action learning and group analytic thinking as it relates to working with groups and teams in organisational settings. For Stacey (2012), one of the many shortcomings of conventional approaches to leadership development is that they do not pay enough attention to the exploration of group dynamics. This resonates with my experience as both participant and leader of leadership development programmes. The only reference to group process that I encountered as a participant on leadership development programmes, and previously shared as a facilitator, was Tuckman's four stages of team/group development – forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965).[5] And as far as I can tell this still appears to be the 'go to' framework for understanding group process on traditional development programmes.

Stacey (2012) argues that expert leaders do not close down conversations too quickly, rather they seek to widen and deepen communication and orchestrate opportunities for exploration and sense-making (see Chapter 3). He contends that a sensitivity to group dynamics can help managers to develop the practical judgement required to know when to 'open up and when to close down' conversation (ibid.: 114). Mowles argues that group analysis 'aims to make group members more aware, better at noticing and more skilful in their interactions with others' (2017b: 6); capacities that are integral to sense-making, reflexivity, and practical

judgement. Disillusionment with mainstream understandings of leadership and organisation and the dominant discourse in relation to leadership and organisation development, discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3, had been the catalyst for exploring alternative perspectives and sustained my perseverance with group analysis.

The Reflective Practice in Organisations (RPO) programme explored many of the same themes that were covered in the National Foundation Course in Group Analysis, but it was during this programme that this way of thinking/working made sense to me and started to show up in my thinking/practice in a noticeable and meaningful way. I still have a long way to go. I know enough to know that I do not know enough, but in my experience, this does not mean that those who have had little, if any, exposure to group analytic thinking should shy away from trying to help the groups they work with to make sense of the context in which they find themselves. Mowles argues that group analytic thinking is useful in helping to 'better frame [the] enduring problems in organizational life' and this can help managers to 'work against the tendency to rush to action without reflection' and 'address the profound feelings which are often provoked by being in relation with others, often in conditions of uncertainty' (2017a: 221). So, are Revans' fears well founded? Do reflective spaces that explore emotion and group dynamics run the risk of becoming all talk and no action? As a catalyst for this discussion, I want to share a vignette from a colleague who has been working in this way.

All talk and no action?

Chris Mowles is Professor of Complexity and Management, and Director of the Doctor of Management Programme, University of Hertfordshire. He also works as a consultant with senior management teams, supporting them in particularly difficult situations. Clients include the NHS, the Department for International Development, the United Nations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and many large international non-governmental organisations (Oxfam, Save the Children, WaterAid, etc.). Chris has Group Work Practitioner status with the IGA and continues his involvement there.

ACTION LEARNING SETS[6]

Over a two-year period [I] took part in a complex organisational intervention designed both to evaluate and develop a therapy service in a Scottish NHS region, part of which was aimed at developing the department's leaders. The therapy service comprised 150 full-time equivalent employees covering a dispersed rural area. Like many public sector organisations, this department had been affected by a series of reorganisations, alongside

which it had experienced problems of staff retention, a higher than average number of complaints about poor service, and attention from local politicians as a consequence. Routine difficulties of management and leadership were compounded by a new matrix organisational structure, which was organised through five local hubs and at the same time required regional service coherence. Eight service leaders were answerable to their local managers but were also instructed to lead and develop the service regionally.

Ours was not the first organisational intervention to have tried to improve service performance. Previously, a team of consultants had produced a report comparing and contrasting what they found in this particular department against what they considered to be 'best practice' in similar therapy departments. They produced a list of recommendations setting out what the department and its leaders should be doing – a list which was accepted by the leadership team but which they had struggled to implement. By contrast, in our consultancy intervention we were concerned to start with what managers and leaders were actually doing now, rather than what they ought to be doing. We considered that the development of leadership and management practice would be central to supporting this particular department to develop. Although the benchmarking process which resulted from the previous report was undoubtedly helpful, it gave little assistance to the leadership team in knowing how to develop what they were already doing in their particular context and how to address the department's principal concerns. It was this latter perspective that we were keen to work with.

Alongside a review of waiting lists, service delivery and other service-specific matters, we also set up four learning sets of eight people, one comprising the leadership team, which met every three months for half a day to discuss the way in which team members were working in their local environments and how they were working together. Participants in the groups were encouraged to keep journals about what was going on for them at work if this helped, but there was no obligation to do so. The only requirement was to come prepared to talk about what was going on for them at work; what preoccupied them, and to describe what their role in the process was. It was a method designed to attend to the constantly emerging patterns of power and interdependence that arise in any organisation and to make the everyday practice of leadership the heart of the enquiry. Participants in the process were required to reflect upon aspects of their work which they found problematic, perplexing or damaging to their sense of professionalism, and the way that they were co-creating these patterns of interaction with others. So, one focus for the leadership team became the extent to which the team itself was functioning, which we returned to again and again.

> Not only were participants in the learning sets invited to pay attention to their relationships with others, they were also encouraged to consider themselves more widely as researchers of the working practices in the organisation they had been appointed to lead. In encounters with their colleagues, and where differences emerged, they sometimes came up hard against their own assumptions about what they were doing and why they were doing it. There was no intention that staff involved in the learning sets should necessarily produce solutions to those problems which in many organisations can bring intractable and repeated difficulties, such as those caused by constant reorganisation. Instead they were encouraged to deliberate together without the pressure of an immediate requirement for action and to engage more intensively in conversations about the way they were working. The intention was for leaders and managers to gain new insights into their practice in order to create the possibility of their working differently.
>
> [...]
>
> Insights from the complexity sciences problematise the idea of linear cause and effect. It would be a claim too far, then, that this particular intervention with the leadership team, and managers in the other learning sets, directly led to improvements in service and in leadership practice over the two years. However, what we did notice was an enhanced ability of the leadership team to engage confidently with each other, despite differences and antagonisms, and to tackle some of the enduring difficulties in the wider organisation less defensively. They became more fluent in describing what they were doing and why, and began to notice more coherently how they were interacting with others.
>
> Mowles in Flinn and Mowles (2014)

To explore the importance of reflecting on group dynamics in the action learning set process and pick up on the themes arising in Chris's narrative, I want to share something of my experience of studying for the IGA's inaugural Diploma in RPO. More specifically, I want to examine four of the many aspects of group analytic thinking/practice that I have found useful in my practice.

- Dynamic administration (Behr and Hearst, 2005)
- Journalling and creating spaces for reflection
- Letting go and adapting to the context and/or type of group you are working with (Thornton, 2016)
- Endings

As part of the accreditation, students are obliged to complete 30 hours of practice as a convenor of reflective practice group (RPG) sessions. The RPG sessions

that I reflected on during my involvement were the Community Meetings held with the three groups of managers that attended MSOL during the duration of the RPO programme. In the narratives below, names have been changed in order to protect colleagues' anonymity.

Let's give it another 5 minutes

Prior to commencing the RPO programme, my time-keeping during Community Meetings was inconsistent. When I arrived at UH in 2007, I was advised that colleagues 'hardly ever show up on time'. Explanations for this involved the twin rationalisations of (i) academic lectures starting at 5 minutes past the hour and (ii) colleagues working to 'university time'. Thus, I would often find myself at the beginning of each workshop/Community Meeting uttering the phrase that opens this section. Subsequently, I would start the Community Meeting when I deemed that anticipated latecomers had been given sufficient time to accommodate potential traffic problems, personal crises, etc. and finish the session when I felt that the conversation had 'run out of steam'. Consequently, Community Meetings might start anywhere between 9.00 and 9.15 a.m. and finish somewhere between 9.25 and 9.45 a.m.

Dynamic administration

Behr and Hearst define dynamic administration as 'the various activities which the conductor performs in order to create and maintain' the group analytic setting (2005: 42). They go on to add that this 'includes such apparently mundane tasks as arranging the furniture in the room and drafting letters to group members' and this is important because they 'have dynamic significance and have to be woven into the material which forms the analytic process' (ibid.: 42). Schlapobersky argues that in relation to dynamic administration the group conductor's responsibilities fall into two categories: (i) 'the construction of the group, including "composition and selection"'; and (ii) 'managing the group's settings and boundaries' (2016: 237).

However, he also acknowledges that construction, composition, and selection are less manageable for experiential/process groups, particularly those that are 'composed from the membership attending what might be a course or a conference'. Although he doesn't refer specifically to leadership development groups, I would argue that the same constraints in relation to construction, composition, and selection apply. Drawing on the work of Behr and Hearst (2005),[7] Schlapobersky identifies the following 12 principles of dynamic administration:

1 Dynamic administration is the means by which the conductor creates and maintains the setting of the group.

The conductor:

2 Provides structures for the group in time and place
3 Mediates communication between the group and the outside world
4 Guards the group's boundaries and manages its times
5 Gives definition to boundary events like late arrivals or premature departures so they can be explored therapeutically
6 Helps ensure all actions are woven into the texture of the group's dynamics
7 Takes responsibility for furniture and furnishment of the room, including its circle of chairs
8 Handles notices about absences and provides messages to the group from absentees
9 Provides out-group contact with relatives on the one hand and with fellow professionals on the other
10 Maintains correspondence with other clinicians concerned with the well-being of group members
11 Maintains a memory for the group in terms of its dynamic history and the dynamic history of its members
12 Fee-payment issues for groups in private practice are an integral part of dynamic administration.

Stripping out those principles that I would think are more relevant to group analytic/therapeutic settings, that is, principles 9, 10, 11, and 12, I argue that taking a complexity approach to group work involves paying attention to most aspects of the remaining seven responsibilities of the group conductor. The consistent and conducive room/environment and circle of chairs have been part of my way of working since MSOL commenced back in 2008. However, I now ensure that Community Meetings start and end on time. At the start of each session, I update the group on any known absentees or prearranged latecomers. And following the session, I check in with any 'unauthorised' absentees. I have come to understand the importance of dynamic administration in helping to create a 'safe' space for both the group and me.

As noted above, I had participated in several groups that had been run along group analytic lines (DMan, Experiential Group, Foundation Course) and I had never really understood the convenor's compulsion for starting and ending on time. Even though I had engaged with the theory on several occasions, I had not grasped the importance of dynamic administration to the smooth running of the group. In holding and containing anxiety, dynamic administration promotes the conditions required for exchange (learning) (Thornton, 2016: 32). My initial motivation for sticking to the allotted time was compliance with the 'rules' of working in a group engaged in analytic/reflective practice. This resonates with the argument that one might initially find oneself 'sticking to the letter of the law' as a means of moving from 'novice to competent beginner' (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986. See Chapter 3).

My compliance soon turned to advocacy as I witnessed the positive effects that adhering to the principles of dynamic administration seemed to be having on both me and the groups I was working with. Starting and ending on time, informing the group of any known absentees or prearranged latecomers, following up with 'unauthorised' absentees made a huge difference. Over the months, I noticed fewer latecomers, fewer long silences, and greater contribution from individual group members. This enabled me to relax and focus on what might not be being said, identifying the parallels between group needs and what might be needed in the wider organisation, etc. As you will by now no doubt be aware, I am not suggesting cause and effect, or indeed, linearity. Group member participation inevitably fluctuated and some of the patterns of interaction that I am describing as 'positive effects' would most likely have occurred over time as the group got to know me and each other better. However, if I compare my experiences with earlier MSOL groups, my acting in the space differently did have some influence.

My engagement with the theory of dynamic administration helped me not only to make sense of what I am being asked to do as a convenor of RPGs but also to explore the parallels that convening has with leading/managing. As facilitators/convenors and leader-managers, we are in charge but not in control (Streatfield, 2001). This is a paradox that we find ourselves navigating daily. In his book, *The Paradox of Control in Organizations* (2001), Philip Streatfield recounts his experience as a supply chain director at SmithKline Beecham. On taking up the role, Streatfield was charged with improving the yield on the production line for a capsule tablet, a cold remedy known as Contac 400. He explains:

> The process involved spraying sugar solution onto sugar crystals and building up a pellet with coating powders including the drug substance. I was told that knowing when the pellets were wet enough to apply the powder, and yet not too wet, was the key to meeting the specification. How did the operators know this? They watched and felt the beds of pellets and just knew when a batch was going to turn clumpy (too wet) or when powder would fly off up the extracts (too dry).
>
> *Ibid.: 14*

Streatfield goes on to describe multitudinous attempts to identify the optimum time for the operators to spray, based on scientific investigation under the tenets of total quality management (TQM), only to discover that yields based on these principles were never as good as the yields produced by the operators continuing to spray at the time that they 'just knew' it to be right. Drawing on the complexity sciences and the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, Streatfield identifies what he terms the paradox of control. That is, as the manager, he is in charge but not in control of the production process. Behr and Hearst argue that in the early stages of group formation the conductor is often 'on the receiving end of omniscient and omnipotent projections' (2005: 91). They contend that in these situations the conductor has 'to disabuse the group gradually of these fantasies,

and at the same time introduce them to the analytic culture' (ibid.). Streatfield, in acknowledging that to achieve optimal results he must share the responsibility for production with the production team, came to disabuse not only the group of these fantasies but also *himself*.

This is a good illustration of the sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement (see Chapter 3) that I have been pointing at throughout this book. In the midst of being caught up in repetitive (stuck) cycles of activity based on the deceptive certainty of rational control (in this case, TQM), Streatfield is able to become more detached in his involvement to make sense of the situation in which he finds himself, reflexively challenge his own thinking, and exhibit the kind of practical judgement required to articulate a next step that resonates with others. He recognises the operators, and they simultaneously recognise him. And it is in this mutual process of recognition that he emerges as a leader. However, this is also a good illustration of the futility of trying to separate leadership and management. As argued in Chapter 2, if one thinks of leadership as making sense of the context in which one finds oneself (and articulating a next step that others recognise and support), and of managing as coping with that context and the intended and unintended consequences of the next step, then as illustrated in this example it is in the midst of coping with each new next step that Streatfield makes sense of the context. Thus, management and leadership, and leading and managing are two sides of the same coin – they occur simultaneously and cannot be split.

And this paradox can be seen in the role of the group analytic conductor. Behr and Hearst describe the situation in which the conductor has sole 'responsibility for creating and maintaining the setting' but in which 'the analytic task is shared with the rest of the group [allowing] for a creative interplay between the conductor as the guardian of the group's stability and the group as the agent of therapeutic change' (2005: 43). This resonates with Streatfield's description of his role as 'guardian of the line':

> This did not mean abdicating my authority as a manager. There were unofficial rules that kept everyone in line. Those who did not pull their weight, or who abused the rules expected to be pulled back in line. I learned that it was part of my role to be guardian of the line that we were together constructing, articulating that line and disciplining those who crossed it.
>
> *(2001: 21)*

For my practice, this means that there are opportunities to explore the parallels between what happens between me and the group, and what happens between them and the groups that they manage. The effective exercise of dynamic administration does not lead to control, but in containing some of the anxiety of not knowing, it allows conductors and managers, participants, and teams, to engage with the primary task more readily, and not get caught up in potentially destructive unconscious processes. As illustrated by Ava's narrative, in Chapter 6, small changes/not

adhering to what has been agreed in terms of dynamic administration can impact on participant experience, particularly when anxiety is already heightened by the thought of endings (see 'Endings' below), as it was in Ava's case.

Note taking and creating spaces for reflection

As part of the RPO programme, we were assigned a supervisor with whom we worked in small groups (a supervisor plus three students) to make sense of what we were experiencing in our (reflective group) practice. This involved keeping a journal of our experience(s). Not wanting to distract myself or others during the Community Meetings by taking notes, I began to offer a comfort break at the end of the session, during which I would jot down any themes and my initial reflections on Post-its. I would then sit down in the evening after the workshop and expand on these first thoughts. By way of illustration, here is an example of a typical journal entry.

Journalling

We started at 9.00 a.m. Most of us were there on time, with Margaret and Linda arriving late. I updated the group about two members who had been in touch to say they were ill (Alan and Julie) and initiated a quick round of introductions to welcome and integrate those members who were new to the group. I (re)introduced the session (Community Meeting) as 'a space for us to think about and share our thoughts and experiences of managing and leading at UH'.

Libby, who often speaks first, opened with a question: 'Do senior managers come on this programme?' I asked, 'What's the question behind the question?' and this opened up the discussion into her and other participants' experience that the collaborative approaches to leadership that we have been exploring on the programme seemed to be in short supply the further up the hierarchy you looked. This led to a rich conversation about hubris, and the potential for shame if senior managers shared their uncertainties with colleagues on a programme like this. While some of the group said they would welcome this, others felt that this would be too anxiety-provoking for all parties.

The conversation moved on to the difficulty of challenging authority, and Mary shared an experience of being challenged by the Vice Chancellor in a senior executive meeting and not being backed up by her line manager (a member of the senior executive team). I introduced the themes of power, collusion, and co-creation. That is, how we are all influencing while simultaneously being influenced, thus co-creating patterns of interaction (Stacey) that might not be useful to anyone involved (the Abilene paradox[8]). We then discussed the challenges of bureaucracy and standardisation and the potential for this to constrain innovation. I suggested that this is another paradox whereby boundaries and structures enable and constrain at the same time.

The conversation moved on to what senior managers might do to reduce their administrative burden, and I brought the group back with the comment that 'it is interesting that we have spent a lot of time during this session talking about what senior managers should or could be doing. What do you make of this?' We then began to talk about our own agency in the situations we find ourselves in, problematised 'quick' or 'easy fixes', and wondered what this meant for our own practice.

We finished at 10.00 a.m. (the comfort break allowed me to scribble some notes about the session).

Although I had become accustomed to the value of writing reflective narratives as part of the DMan process and had subsequently been inviting managers on leadership development programmes to do the same (see Chapter 3), I had stopped doing this myself, and yet the reflections I wrote during the RPO programme were invaluable in identifying themes, patterns, parallel processes, and instances of potential projection and transference. Additionally, the support of the supervision group set me wondering why we, in most cases now, routinely think of providing supervision for coaches, but we don't necessarily do the same for those colleagues involved in other forms of leadership development.

Letting go and adapting to the type of group you are working with

One of the attractions of the RPO programme was the emphasis on organisations. The IGA programmes on which I had participated previously (the experiential group and the National Foundation Course) had understandably been dominated by people who worked in clinical settings. The convenors of the groups I worked in stuck to strict group analytic (Foulkes, 1975) ways of working. That is, they only appeared in the room at the very moment the session was due to start. They called time at the end of the session and left the room immediately. They shared little of themselves during the session positioning themselves as the 'blank screen' by which projection and transference might be more easily identified. Similarly, the psychoanalytic interpretations of events, proffered by the convenors, would not be welcomed by the participants with whom I was working on leadership development programmes.

This previous experience led to me offering minimal contributions to the early MSOL Community Meetings that I had started to run along RPG lines. This enforced minimalism was partly the result of my wanting to ensure that the groups did the work, and partly the result of my anxiety about wanting to offer the 'perfect' interpretation of what might be going on in the group. In comparing the complexity approach taken on the DMan programme with the group analytic method, Mowles argues that one of the key differences is that 'faculty members are just as likely to make personal disclosures as are research students. This is partly to acknowledge that this is a group committed to doctoral research rather than therapy' (2017a: 225). One of the lessons that I have had to relearn is that managers in work settings might need some help in finding their voice in groups. Consequently, I reintroduced

several strategies to relieve their anxiety and open up the conversation. The following narrative is a good example of what I am pointing to here.

How are you arriving?

Following on from a previous workshop on creativity, I began the session by inviting the group to choose an object from the table (that I had set up at the back of the room) that signified something for them about how they were arriving. I did this partly as a reminder of the types of tools and techniques that we had explored in the previous session, and partly as a means of ensuring that everyone was encouraged to take the opportunity to speak during the Community Meeting, something that some participants were still finding it difficult to do.

9.00 to 10.00 a.m.

The objects, about twenty in number, were random items that I had accumulated over the years and brought together as a resource for use in this type of exercise – a model New York taxi, a broken key, a battery, a writing slate, a tea bag, etc. As a further prompt, I added that this was not an invitation for all the participants to tell us which mode of transport they had used that morning – car, bike, etc. – but rather what was on their minds at the start of the workshop.

Margaret chose as her object a set of Post-it notes and introduced the item with 'I feel that I have stickies on the brain'. I asked what that felt like. Margaret explained that it felt terrible. A peer was in the habit of micro-managing Margaret on joint projects and left little room for Margaret to challenge her because she always preceded her 'interference' by stating 'I know that I am a terrible micro-manager, but …' This opened up a rich vein of conversation about the multiple pressures that we find ourselves buffeted by, and the difficulty of challenging someone when they are apologising for the very behaviour that you would like them to address, before launching into that very behaviour.

3.45 to 4.30 p.m.

Towards the end of the day, I decided to forego the usual coaching sessions in favour of a second RPG session at which I invited the group to return to the table at the back of the room and pick an object that said something about how they were leaving. They did this and joined me in the circle.

Everyone picked a different object than the one they had chosen in the morning.

Margaret ('stickies on the brain') chose the blank slate. For her, it signified ideas, and she said that she was 'going away with some ideas for next steps'.

For me, the blank slate was a powerful metaphor for getting rid of the stickies on brain.

Letting go of my (now conscious) need to act like a 'group analyst' and replacing it with the freedom to act like a convenor of reflexive practice groups proved beneficial both for me and the group. My anxieties, arising from attempts to do what I felt that I ought to be doing, rather than what I felt I needed to be doing for the group, reduced significantly. This allowed me to concentrate on holding and containing the group's anxieties, which in turn provided the space that the group might need to get on with the primary task. Thornton argues that every group is different, as convenor, this 'requires you to think vigorously about the purpose, context and membership of each group with whom you work; doing so enables you to craft, with each group, appropriate methodologies, depth, and frankness of engagement' (2016: xix).

I had to accept that I was not working with open-ended analytic groups, but with time-limited stranger groups that might need encouragement, such as the catalyst of the random objects, to reach a level of safety that allowed for disclosure and exchange. Thornton's reminder that 'all teams are groups, but not all groups are teams' (2016: 11) was timely and useful. The groups that I was working with could be described, in Thornton's terms, as 'learning groups', i.e., groups that have 'come together as relative strangers for the purpose of individual learning' (ibid.). For Thornton:

> [The] richness of learning arises from the fact that learners set and work actively on *different* learning goals. In such a group, members can share profound insights and significantly refine their interpersonal and collaborative skills; in fact, in a successful learning group, these outcomes are inevitable.
>
> *Ibid.: 12, emphasis in the original*

Endings

The fourth element from group analytic thinking that has found its way into my practice is the importance of endings. The end was signalled early during the RPO programme – 'we are half-way through the programme' or 'we have three more sessions in which to explore these themes', etc. – and the importance of leaving the group with some positive memories of their experience was also highlighted.

Saying goodbye

> Given that this was the last workshop, I decided to hold the Community Meeting at the end of the day. So rather than having the usual 9.00 a.m. start for our Community Meeting, we held it from 3.00 p.m.– 4.00 p.m. I negotiated this change with the group at the start of the session and as I shared my rationale for this, namely my dissatisfaction with the nature of endings that had occurred (or more accurately hadn't occurred), it catalysed a short discussion about parallel processes across the organisation. Nancy and Sue shared their disappointment

about the regularity with which they learned of departures long after colleagues had gone, and usually as a result of emailing them and receiving an automatic reply detailing their retirement, new job, etc. Sue had to leave before 3.00 p.m., so she said her goodbyes during the day.

3.00 to 4.00 p.m.

I provided cakes and fruit to celebrate the end of the programme and as people settled into their seats in the circle, I introduced the session as an opportunity to look in the 'rear view mirror' and notice 'how far we had come'; as well as an opportunity to look to the future. The session was quite humbling with colleagues taking turns to share what their involvement in the programme had meant to them and how my facilitation/leadership of the programme had made a major contribution to this. I batted the first couple of compliments away but was then able to accept them with a little more grace.

Pleasingly, and without any prompting from me, colleagues then went on to share their appreciation of each other's contribution to the programme/learning community. Mary singled out the change that she had seen in Alex during the course of the programme, apologising for the maternal nature of her comments (Alex is in his mid-twenties and Mary is in her mid-forties). Alex took Mary's comments as they were intended and went on to acknowledge the changes that he had identified in himself, as well as those that had been commented on by those around him. The group then identified the elements of the programme that had been challenging but useful, as well as the fun and laughter that we had had along the way. The end of the hour came quickly with colleagues sharing how much they would miss this space, as well as how better prepared they felt to go on without it.

Thornton argues that the effective coach, working with individual clients, should have 'knowledge in at least three fields: psychological literacy to understand the client, good interpersonal skills to facilitate the learning process, and a grasp of business/organizational life that enables a joint understanding of the work context to develop, with the client … plus knowledge of a fourth field, group dynamics' (2016: 11). To coach/convene groups, she further argues that 'an understanding of applied systems and complexity thinking is also indispensable, or s/he will have little understanding of the reach of her/his interventions with teams' (ibid.: 13).

Engaging with group analysis and group analytic ways of working has helped me to enhance all four of the attributes that Thornton deems necessary to work with individuals, and my studies for the DMan, drawing on the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2012; Stacey and Mowles, 2016), have given me an excellent grounding in the fifth. This has given me confidence to create and act in the RPG spaces that I find myself in, not with any illusions that I have the answers, but rather with the more helpful knowledge that I don't, and that is OK. This also means that I can spend my energies

creating a safe space that contains and holds the group's anxieties enabling them to do the work in which exchange and learning is possible, but not guaranteed. This last point is ably illustrated by Ava's experience (see Chapter 6).

In addition, participation in the programme has helped me to be (i) more nuanced and adaptive in my approach and aspirations for the various types of group that I find myself working with – be they learning groups or work teams; (ii) more aware of the importance of note taking and reflection for thinking, linking, processing, and understanding; (iii) an advocate for dynamic administration and alert to the parallels this has for management/leadership; and (iv) much more deliberate in my approach to contracting, and beginnings and endings.

From Leadership Experience Groups to Reflective Practice Groups and back again

In relation to the activity under review in this chapter, i.e., group work, it is difficult to say where a complexity approach starts and group analytic ways of working end. The DMan was developed in collaboration with members of the IGA and Ralph Stacey is a trained group analyst himself. Chris Mowles describes the DMan group at UH as:

> [A] type of therapeutic community where the therapeutic aspect of what we are doing together is de-emphasized in favour of research, making links with organizational life, and completing a doctorate … Nonetheless experiential groups, reflection, reflexivity and communicative interaction are at the heart of what the programme offers as a way of coming to terms with the hurly burly of organizational life.
>
> *(2017a: 222–223)*

Exploring reflection, reflexivity, and communicative interaction and the hurly burly of organisational life are at the heart of what I find myself doing in the leadership development spaces that I am responsible for. The title of this section – 'From Leadership Experience Groups to Reflective Practice Groups and back again' – reflects the sense that I am making of my engagement with group analytic ways of thinking/working, particularly over the last three years. On reflection, my immersion in the discipline meant that for a while I tried to work in a group analytic way or more accurately in a way that I understood to be group analytic, hence I dropped the use of the term LEG in favour of RPG for the groups that I started to work with during my RPO studies.

Recently my position has shifted. I am back to asking the question that I struggled with so much in the early days on the DMan: what else might be going on here? And what, if anything, does group analytic thinking/practice offer? And not only group analytic thinking but also 'insights from the complexity sciences, the process sociology of Elias (1939, 2001), Elias and Scotson (1994), pragmatic theories of communication (Mead, 1934), experience and values (Dewey, 1934, 1958),

a complex understanding of time and action (Mead, 1932, 1934; Joas, 1996) and paradox' (Mowles, 2015, 2017a: 223). Consequently, for the two new groups that I have started to work with recently, I have reinstated LEGs as a more accurate title/descriptor for what we might find ourselves doing together.

As noted above, Stacey (2012) argues that a sensitivity to group dynamics is a critical component in the development and exercise of one's capacity for practical judgement. He explains this sensitivity as 'an ability to interpret what is going on in a group' (ibid.: 114). Stacey argues that the 'inevitable ambiguities and uncertainties of organizational life are bound to make people feel anxious' and this anxiety can lead to 'high degrees of dependency on their leaders and managers, waiting for instruction on what to do, thereby slowing down the responses to ambiguity and uncertainty' (ibid.). Thus, in contrast to Revans, who views the exploration of group dynamics as a diversion that might prevent action being taken, Stacey sees the processing of what might be going on in the group as a prerequisite for action, particularly if the anxiety levels are such that they are preventing the group from thinking. This sentiment is shared by advocates of critical action learning whereby the exploration of affect and the acknowledgement of unconscious processes, power relations, tensions, and contradictions are important to offset the potential for group dynamics to lead to 'inaction' (Vince, 2008).

Reflections: Talk is action

> Relationships and the mental state of groups are not a luxury to be invested in when it can no longer be avoided, but a pre-condition for anything being done or delivered in every organisation, be it of large, small, or medium size.
>
> *Gerhard Wilke (2014: xvi)*

It seems trite to say that talk, or conversation, is action, but whatever we get done in organisations, we get done in iterative patterns of communicative interaction, that is, conversations, ongoing processes of gesture, and response (see Chapter 5). In the organisational settings in which you work, how many times have you heard the following phrases?

- This hasn't been thought through.
- That meeting was a complete waste of time.
- A bad decision is better than no decision.
- There's an elephant in the room.
- Let's not open up that can of worms.

A reading of Revans' early publications suggests that the whole point of action learning is to be critical (in particular, challenging the [academic] notion of management/administration as science), social (focusing more on developing the relationships between set members and their colleagues rather than the capabilities

of the individual) and to generate new learning (which involves letting go of current thinking or unlearning). His equation for learning is L = P + Q, where L stands for learning, P for programmed knowledge, and Q for questioning insight. For me, Revans was encouraging reflexivity, that is, thinking about one's thinking in the company of others with a view to letting go of ways of thinking/doing that might no longer be serving us well. However, I contend that the reason this often does not happen in conventional action learning set spaces is due to the fact that the insights offered by participants are steeped in the type of mainstream, instrumental, linear cause, and effect type of thinking that taking a complexity approach to leadership development problematises. Rather than acknowledging and working with paradoxes, conventional approaches look to collapse them. Bolden *et al*. think that this way of thinking is more prevalent in the West, where:

> For many people their first impulse upon being confronted with a paradox is to try to 'resolve it', to render down the conflicting statements so that they agree and the apparent contradiction can be made to go away. We are hard-wired to regard anything difficult as a problem needing to be fixed.
>
> *Bolden et al. (2016: 3)*

I can understand Revans' anxiety that conversations can end up being abstract and divorced from the operational realities of organisational life. Indeed, this is a good description of the shortcomings of the dominant discourse that I have been pointing to throughout this book and the main reason for the complexity approach to leadership and organisation resonating with me in the first place. Conventional approaches to action learning have lost sight of the fact that Revans refutes mainstream thought and academic conceptions of management as science. I contend that this is what Brook *et al*. (2016) are pointing to in their calls for a 'new', critical form of action learning. Thornton argues that properly led groups 'can help people face hard realities together, fostering resolve and generating creative, realistic solutions to business challenges. Groups can help individuals overcome stress and other "knee-jerk" responses to threat or change, and so work productively once again' (Thornton, 2016: 5).

I am also alert to the potential for RPG spaces and talking to become idealised, thus ignoring or covering over the destructive forces that group processes can surface (Nitsun, 2015). Working in this way is not for everybody – participants and programme leaders alike (see Chapter 9). However, I have witnessed how useful this way of working can be in helping managers to judge when to poke the elephant, and open up the can of worms, and when not to (Wilke, 2014); accepting that the meaning of such a gesture will only ever emerge in the responses it provokes. Mowles argues that:

> [M]ethods derived from the group analytic tradition … have the potential for creating more skilful managers who may be more insightful in groups and about

> groups, and who may have more resources for working against more general individualising tendencies which can produce feelings of atomisation and helplessness.
> *(2017b: 12)*

As stated on numerous occasions throughout this book, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the tools, techniques, and methods employed on traditional leadership development programmes, including action learning, but how useful they are in helping managers to go about their day-to-day activities depends on the approach, the focus of attention and the quality of the attendant and ongoing sensemaking, reflexivity, and practical judgement.

Notes

1 The parallels with Collins and Hansen, Kellerman and Pfeffer (see Chapter 1) are not lost on me, nor I suspect on you.
2 Workshops are scheduled around my availability and that of the training room. This means that workshops are hardly ever scheduled to take place on the same day each month, and the gap between sessions can be anything from three to five weeks.
3 This excerpt is taken from the communication sent to the senior management team prior to their conference in March 2009. It was sent as background information for a planned conference session to discuss senior management team development in general and the proposed Leadership Experience Groups in particular.
4 For a more comprehensive exploration of MSOL, see Flinn and Mowles (2014). And for a more expansive exploration of LEGs, see Flinn (2011).
5 I do not have the space to provide a thorough critique of Tuckman (1965), but this is one of those concepts where it pays to go back to the original source material. Tuckman's original research was a meta-analysis of all the journal articles he could find relating to group process. Most studies related to therapy groups, T groups, and groups that had been set up and observed under laboratory conditions. There were very few papers in his analysis that related to group process in work settings. Indeed, in the original article, Tuckman provides the caveat that his theory might not be generalisable to group process in organisational settings. And in an update of this research, some years later (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977), he casts some doubt on whether the 'storming' phase is generalisable outside of therapeutic settings.
6 This narrative is taken from a Leadership Foundation for Higher Education Stimulus Paper that we wrote together (Flinn and Mowles, 2014), and it is interesting to note that Chris called the groups he was working with at that time learning sets, hence my use of the term from the end of the previous paragraph as the title.
7 This appears as *Table 9.2* in Schlapobersky (2016) and is adapted from Behr and Hearst (2005: 42–54).
8 The Abilene paradox is a term coined by Jerry Harvey (1988) to describe what can happen among a group of people when each member mistakenly believes that their own preferences are counter to the group's and, therefore, does not raise objections resulting in an outcome that is counter to the wishes of many (or all) members of the group.

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8

CREATING LARGE GROUP DIALOGUE

Introduction

If I reflect on how my thinking has developed since publication of the first edition, several experiences come to mind. First, moving into academia full-time. Second, becoming involved in the *Creating Large Group Dialogue in Organisations and Society (CLGDOS)* programme/research community.[1] And third, completing the Diploma in Groupwork practice with the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) in Turvey. These are not the only things that have happened to me in the last five years, but I'd say they have had the greatest influence on my thinking/practice in relation to leadership and leadership development in practice. For me, taking experience seriously involves writing about it, so you won't be surprised to learn that I have been doing just that. This chapter is a distillation of two longer pieces that were commissioned and published in edited volumes on complexity and leadership (Flinn, 2022), and leading in education (Flinn, 2023), respectively. The commissioning of these works afforded me the opportunity of exploring the use and usefulness of experiential groups in leadership development/executive education, and the leadership lessons gleaned from convening a space for large group dialogue in HBS.

Leadership development: A rejoinder

Dicks getting in the way of dialogue

It's Sunday afternoon. The lunch break is over, and we are reconvening for the final session of the third and final day of the second teaching weekend of *Leadership and Change. Leadership and Change* is a module on the Hertfordshire Business School (HBS), part-time, Executive MBA (EMBA) programme. The way of working on this module differs from that of other modules in the programme.

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The pedagogy combines experiential, psychodynamic, and group analytic ways of working. Whereas other modules have one or two faculty, *Leadership and Change* has four or five (depending on the size of cohort). Few, if any, lectures are given. Most of the time is spent working as a whole group/community, seated in one large circle of chairs. The spaces in between whole group sessions are allocated to discussions in small groups/learning sets, consisting of seven or eight students, each supported by a member of the teaching team.

A typical cohort comprises a mix of managers from private, public, and charitable sector organisations; their employers ranging from large corporates to small and medium size enterprises (SMEs). This cohort is atypical. Over seventy per cent of the cohort are UK National Health Service (NHS) workers, from the same NHS Trust. As we reconvene, I notice that a subset of students are now sitting behind several tables that they have introduced into the circle of chairs. Not only that but they have also chosen to position the tables, at the front of the room, where at least one or two of the teaching team were seated prior to the lunch break. As the rest of the group settle into what remains of the original circle, I try to gauge whether this is a gesture of playful chiding, an attack of some sort, or a combination. My adrenaline levels start to rise!

It has been an eventful three days.

On the preceding Friday (day one of this three day, second and final weekend of the module), two separate, heated exchanges occurred between individual members of the teaching team and individual students; one in the morning, and one in the afternoon. In between these incidents, we discovered that one of the teaching team had reviewed and provided written feedback on drafts of the first assignment for the students that they were supporting. During the first weekend of the module, we had established with the whole group that this was not on offer. It would be fair to say that some students were less than happy. All in all, it had been a tough day and I was quite relieved when it was over. On arriving home, I got a call from the Module Leader. Following the session, she had asked one of the students for his reflections on the day and he told her that he thought the learning environment was hostile and that some of the teaching team had been 'pea-cocking'. She was ringing for my opinion regarding next steps, and I said we should practise what we preach and address these points with the cohort in the morning, initially in learning sets and then in plenary.

This we did, first thing, Saturday morning. The accusation of a hostile learning environment did not resonate with students in the small group discussions, or if it did, this was not shared. Indeed, the fact that we were asking seemed to baffle some, who said that they were enjoying the module and did not feel that there was anything amiss. Following the small group discussions, students showed little appetite for exploring this further in plenary, so we moved on to the next session. The remainder of Saturday passed by without incident. A direct contrast, then, with the actions of the small group of students on this final afternoon, who not only introduced the tables into the circle of chairs but also berated members of the teaching

team for the real and perceived injustices they had experienced across the weekend. We waited until the vent had run its course before calling it a day. The thing that struck me (as an uneasy feeling on the day, but more clearly as I reflected on this in the days to follow) was the make-up of the group of students who introduced the tables.

As noted above, most students in this cohort, some seventy per cent plus, are employed by the same NHS Trust. Although the majority don't work directly with each other, some do. There were no clinical leads in the sub-group that introduced the tables. The administrative managers are for the most part, male and white, whilst the clinicians are mainly male people of colour. The following Friday, on the train journey to CLGDOS, I wrote in my reflective journal the following summary of my experience of that session – *White, male, middle-class, managers, mansplaining to the rest of the community…Dicks getting in the way of dialogue*. I wondered whether this mirrored in some way the relations between administrators and clinicians in the Trust.

Initial reflections

> Educational leaders…now more than ever…must be…relational in how…they facilitate brave spaces to foster critical learning experiences for all, and…reflexive in how they inquire into their own identities and what they can learn from others about racial literacy and transformative change.
>
> *Katie Pak and Sharon Ravitch (2021: xi)*

During our reflections as a teaching team, a day or two after the event, I felt that we post-rationalised our relative failure to explore what happened on Sunday afternoon with the following: (i) there was not enough time left in the session to do the potential learning justice; (ii) the module was ending and it would be inappropriate to open something up without the opportunity of processing it fully; and (iii) our best response in the face of such attacking behaviour was to make no response at all. This was not the first time we missed and/or passed up the opportunity to explore an altercation, and it won't be the last, but this incident had something of a different quality to it. My reasons for not stepping in on that final afternoon were a combination of (i) not having a clear enough grasp on what sense I was actually making of what might be going on in the moment, (ii) anger that our colleague's transgression of the agreement we had made regarding drafts put us in a vulnerable position, (iii) a corresponding fear of saying something hurtful to and/or about said colleague that I might later regret, (iv) fear of saying something hurtful to and/or about the sub-group that I might later regret, and (v) a related anxiety regarding the ethics and potential repercussions of 'calling out' said sub-group in front of their work colleagues. I will return to these themes and my current sense-making of this experience later in the chapter, but before doing this, I want to explore the use of experiential groups in leadership development; more specially those methods that

draw on theories/practices that have therapeutic origins, namely, group analytic and psychodynamic approaches.

Experiential groups I: A group analytic approach

> What especially characterises a group analytic spirit is our determination to create and to protect spaces of equality where in the face of our differences we strive to maintain communication, thinking and, we always hope, understanding.
>
> *David Glyn (2019)*

Mowles (2017a, 2017b) argues that working with 'group analytic methods, as adapted for the research environment' helps manager-participants to learn to cope with three things: 'uncertainty and the feelings of anxiety which this often arouses; thinking about leadership as a relational and negotiated activity, and encouraging reflexivity' (Mowles, 2017a: 505). Mowles is at pains to point out that DMan groups are not therapy groups. He uses the term 'experiential group' as it is 'used in group analytic practice to distinguish a group run along group analytic lines but without the explicit purpose of therapy' (ibid.: 512). However, he is also keen to point out that although it is not therapy, working in this way can have therapeutic outcomes for those involved.

The group analytic approach to teaching was introduced on *Leadership and Change* over a decade ago. The exploration of the patterns of relating that we find ourselves caught up in during the weekends provides an opportunity for exploring episodes of 'equivalence' (Hopper, 2018). Hopper defines equivalence as 'an enactment within the grouping which has its basic origins…in another time and another place' (ibid.). Such enactments are often referred to in group analytic and psychodynamic circles as parallel processes, but I agree with Hopper when he argues that this is too 'neutral and lazy' a term to use for the manifestations of those things that the group finds it difficult to consciously talk about (ibid.).

On the *Leadership and Change* module, one in two cohorts alters the circle of chairs in some way: usually by introducing tables. Challenges to authority are a regular feature of the module. Indeed, if the students do not challenge us at some point during the teaching weekends, we feel somewhat aggrieved to have missed an opportunity to explore the similarities between struggling to relate to each other on the module and the day-to-day struggles that we all regularly encounter as authority figures in the workplace. The teaching team's willingness and ability to take our experience seriously is one reason why the module garners such positive student feedback, not only on the 'happy sheets' but also long after the programme has ended. However, working in this way is not without its challenges.

Nichol argues that 'pain is a characteristic feature of the experiential group', but it is 'also a feature of professional training and development in areas such as management and teaching, but one which is not acknowledged' (Nichol, 1997: 93). Nichol contends that the painful experiences of anxiety, shame, and grief, experienced by patients in therapy groups, are an 'inevitable feature of [any and all

processes of] learning and personal change' (ibid.: 93). During his own training and development as a group psychotherapist, Nichol became interested in the parallels between the pain that patients experienced in therapy and the pain that he and his fellow students encountered during the learning process. This became the focus of his own doctoral research (Nichol, 1992). The surveys and semi-structured interviews that he carried with his cohort became the raw data for his doctoral thesis. One of the key findings was that participation in experiential groups can produce:

- Anger (which is often expressed towards the group conductor whom they feel is failing them)
- Anxiety (at the prospect of having to self-disclose)
- Threats to identity (as individuals become painfully aware of [uncomfortable] aspects of themselves) due in part to the fact that groups can 'open you up' (Nichol, 1992).

Nichol (1997) also found that the use of experiential groups provided space in which the sharing of 'things which were painful…gave rise to a common experience of not being alone' (ibid.: 99). Although his research was with fellow group psychotherapy trainees, Nichol argues that his findings are just as applicable to managers in organisational settings. He stops short of advocating the use of therapy in management education, but he is adamant that it should involve experiential groups, as anything less would be to short-change not only the management students but also the people that they manage.

Experiential groups II: Psychodynamic approaches

> Being struck offers an opportunity for learning, for making sense as we work through the experience. By drawing attention to this active and emergent nature of learning process and encouraging students to become more self-reflexive, learning can spill over into everyday practices.
>
> *Ann Cunliffe (2002: 42*

Executive educators who work with 'psychodynamic understandings of groups' (Sinclair, 2007: 461) report similar challenges to those faced on *Leadership and Change*. Clancy and Vince (2019) contend that the difficulties of working with the anxiety provoked in drawing attention to the unconscious ways of thinking/acting exhibited by student-managers in experiential groups are worth enduring (ibid.: 175). They share a reflective narrative account of their experience of a week-long experiential module that often attracts students to the point of oversubscription, due in part to the fact that it is often described as 'different' by previous attendees. However, it is this very difference that provokes anxiety, and for Clancy and Vince on one occasion, this comes to a head when one of the students tells 'the professor to "fuck off … if I want to feel my feelings I'll see a bloody shrink"'(ibid.: 175).

For Clancy and Vince, working psychodynamically is important as it helps students 'engage directly with underlying emotions and implicit power structures that are created in the classroom' (ibid.: 176). This, they argue, obliges lecturers to do two things. First, 'to engage with emotions and power relations in the classroom' by holding students 'in the moment' with a view to generating '"here and now" experience from which they can *feel* their reflections on leading and managing as a prerequisite to understanding them' (ibid.: 176, emphasis in original). And second, to draw attention to 'power relations (e.g., differences of gender, class, race, culture apparent in the classroom; or broader tensions and dynamics that have developed in the course group)' with a view to bringing 'to the surface a tension at the heart of organizations' (ibid.: 177). They add:

> For the professor, the approach requires the capacity to think under emotional fire, to withstand the projection of students' hatred and anxiety, to learn from one's own feelings as well as those of others, and to reframe what is happening into nuanced interpretations offering insight for students. Staying in the midst of this discomfort and commenting on its value rather than fleeing from distress is a core feature of the delivery of a psychodynamic approach to experiential learning.
>
> *Ibid.: 177*

Amanda Sinclair, in her 2007 article, *Teaching leadership critically to MBAs: Experiences from heaven and hell*, describes her 'critical pedagogical practice' as being 'framed by longstanding interests in psychoanalysis, in psychodynamic understandings of groups, and in feminism, among other things' (Sinclair, 2007: 461). She describes two very different experiences of working in this way with a cohort of full-time MBA students (who had chosen to attend her module as an elective element of their programme) and a cohort of part-time EMBA students (for whom, the module was a last minute, compulsory addition to their programme). Her experience with the full-timers represents the 'heaven' of the article's title and her experience with the part-timers is the 'hell'. Indeed, she describes how the experience with the EMBA students left her 'dripping with and scoured by emotion at times' (ibid.: 458).

She describes the curriculum at her business school as being focused on making students 'masters of technical knowledge' where the accompanying pedagogy 'often mimicked the worst aspects of corporate life: highly pressured, hierarchical in the way knowledge was treated and interaction was organized, instrumental in advancing the power and interests of an already privileged elite' (ibid.: 459). By contrast, Sinclair's module mirrored Reynolds' (1999) 'four generally shared principles of critical pedagogy including questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions in the theory and practice of management; making explicit power and ideology in institutional and societal practices; confronting claims of rationality and objectivity and how privileged interests benefit from these claims; and finally

working towards an emancipatory ideal' (ibid.: 460). Although this approach was accepted and valued by the full-time MBA students, it was vehemently rejected by a large portion of the part-time EMBA students, to the point where Sinclair stepped off the project mid-module to be replaced by a business school colleague who would provide the 'false certainty provided by idealised models and theories' (Flinn, 2011: 128) that the majority of EMBA students expected.

Sinclair recounts the feelings of shame and the identity-threatening turmoil that she experienced in having to make a choice between adapting to more conventional teaching methods/content or sticking by her convictions to critical management studies scholarship and walking away (Sinclair, 2007: 470). Sinclair argues that, counterintuitively, the more she challenged the 'privileged elite…the more effectively the status quo was maintained' (ibid.: 470). She concludes:

> The mere presence of my subjects in the programme gave the School a lustre of pluralistic tolerance, which might have repelled more deep and far-reaching change. Indeed there was evidence that the work I was doing was valuable to the School's marketing but not taken up in its substance. Many students liked the fact that I was there but, in the end, did not avail themselves of my teaching.
>
> *Ibid.: 470*

Interim reflections

The experiences of Mowles, Nichol, Clancy and Vince, and Sinclair outlined above have helped clarify four strands of thinking for me. First, experiential group work provokes feelings of anger and hostility. On *Leadership and Change*, students have, on occasion, accused the teaching team of 'engineering' situations to provoke anxiety and conflict as a form of 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. I have some empathy with the 'if you go looking for it, you'll find it' critique, but that doesn't mean that the inequities being pointed at aren't also simultaneously present. Examples of enactments of potential equivalence that shed light on asymmetric power differentials and inequalities are present in all classrooms, they go unnoticed because they have become normalised as 'just the way things are/ought to be'. The encouragement to reflexively explore our personal and shared experiences exposes executive education students to inequalities to which they may have become desensitised.

Second, in as much as students experience anxiety, anger, and threats to their identity; these affects are also just as keenly felt across the teaching team. I agree with Clancy and Vince when they argue that as teachers, we must learn to tolerate the 'emotional force of the attack, while also creating an environment in which it can be examined and understood in the service of learning' (Clancy and Vince, 2019: 175). However, this is easier said than done. Mowles (2017a) argues that taking a group analytic approach to experiential groups 'requires some degree of group analytic training on the part of some faculty members' (ibid.: 516). The strong emotions that we experienced as a teaching team hampered our ability to

make effective use of the potential learning opportunities afforded by the enactments that we encountered during the weekend. As teachers, we are in charge, but that does not mean that we get to choose how things play out. As stated previously, from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, this is described as the 'paradox of control' (Streatfield, 2001). People in positions of authority are in charge, but not in control. Teachers are in charge, but not in control. Particularly in executive education where the provision of an outstanding student experience is all too often understood by all concerned as doing whatever it takes to keep the students (the paying customers) happy (see Chapter 6). This is something that Sinclair found to her cost, and it might also partly explain why my colleague felt compelled to comment on draft assignments for members of their learning set.

Sinclair's counterintuitive insight that challenges to the status quo may actually work to maintain it chimes with Robin DiAngelo's (2018) conception of 'white fragility'. Diangelo describes 'white fragility' as a defensive response to any 'challenge to our racial worldview' (DiAngelo, 2018: v). She argues that for white people:

> The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable - the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress inducing situation.
>
> *Ibid.: v*

Diangelo further contends that these defences 'work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy' (ibid.: v). Far from being a weakness, she argues that white fragility 'is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage' (ibid.: v). During a recent teaching session on a module exploring the contribution that senior managers might make to policy, processes, and procedures for equality, diversity, and inclusion, two students rejected my attempts to open a discussion regarding their reticence to introduce some diversity to the cohort's work groups for the next assignment. These students wanted to remain in the homogenous groups that each had established and been working in since the start of the programme a year earlier. My attempts to explore what sense others in the wider group made of this were dismissed by the two students as a 'waste of time'. And this on a module exploring how senior managers might contribute to equality, diversity, and inclusion!

Diangelo's conception of white fragility helps me to see that structural racism was only one of several enactments of potential equivalence elucidated in the summative sentence I used to describe my experience – *white, male, middle-class, managers, mansplaining to the rest of the community…Dicks getting in the way of dialogue.* This incident does not only amplify racial inequity but also inequalities associated with gender, class, privilege, entitlement, and toxic masculinity. The exploration of any one of these factors in isolation would be enough to provoke

anxiety. Diangelo's notion of fragility could just as appropriately suffix any of the characteristics where the power differential favours a particular group; for example, one might talk of male fragility, heterosexual fragility, middle-class fragility, etc. A complexity approach to experiential groups in executive education involves creating spaces that encourage or, at the very least, do not actively discourage, those who experience classroom incidents as enactments of potential equivalence to speak out; to find their voice and share their experiences with a view to catalysing dialogue. As noted above, I contend that we'd find elements of the enactments of potential equivalence highlighted in the Dicks narrative in every classroom; if only we paused to notice and draw attention to them. There is a debate in Higher Education around the need to decolonise the curriculum; maybe we also need to concurrently focus on decolonising, degenderising, and detoxifying our classrooms.

Third, enactments of potential equivalence are more readily identifiable in the larger group. That is, when cohorts come together as a whole. Other modules on the EMBA programme use whole group sessions for (i) housekeeping, (ii) lectures, (iii) briefings and/or debriefings of planned small group activity, and (iv) reflection. Little is done to prepare senior managers for the larger group settings they find themselves in; for instance, Board, senior team, and town hall meetings; departmental briefings; road shows; etc. If one accepts that leadership emerges, and/or doesn't, in patterns of interaction, in which power relations, ideologies, and processes of inclusion and exclusion are iteratively negotiated in the perpetual struggle for mutual recognition (see Chapter 2), then becoming adept at staying in relationship and working with difference is an important capability to develop.

Which leads me to the fourth strand of thinking that writing this chapter has helped to clarify, and that is that in organisational settings, psychoanalytic interpretations are as inappropriate as they are unhelpful. Our personal histories no doubt influence our interactions with others, but it is my contention that psychoanalytic interpretations of group process have no place in workplace and executive educational settings. I wonder if this is what Revans (Revans, 2011 – see Chapter 7) is pointing when he berates the fashion for exploring 'group dynamics' in action learning sets. In my experience, leadership development programmes have neither the space nor the appropriately qualified staff to work with the enactments of potential equivalence that mirror familial relationships and traumas.[2] This goes some way to explain the ambivalence that I exhibit towards group analytic ways of working with groups in Chapter 7. Experiential groups should focus on drawing attention to the cultural and socio-political. This is one reason for why I was drawn to the CLGDOS programme.

Experiential groups III: Large group perspectives

> The small group by its very nature displays only the most fragmentary evidence of social dynamics. To apply small-group or psychoanalytic models to the large group is like trying to play Ludo on a chess board.
>
> *Pat de Maré, in Kreeger (1975: 146)*

> Gathering…in a Larger Group can be both personally and socially emancipating. Hidden power structures…are revealed and interrogating them with others, can change our position in relation to the social world. With the possibility of recognising…how personal experiences relate to what happens as a socio-political level, we can begin to understand how the context has been shaped, and in turn, how it has shaped us.
>
> *Teresa von Sommaruga Howard (2020: 7)*

The CLGDOS programme is based on the philosophy and methodology of Patrick de Maré. De Maré was a member of the original group that formed the Group Analytic Society (now GASI) with Foulkes in 1952 and the IGA in 1971 and he went on to found both the large and median group sections of the IGA in 1984 and 1992, respectively (Lenn and Stefano, 2018). De Maré developed his approach to large groups, in collaboration with Lionel Kreeger at the Halliwick Hospital where they worked with all involved (patients and staff) as a therapeutic community (TC). De Maré came to see the large group as a way 'to both socialise the individual and humanise society' (ibid.: xxv) and as 'one of the best educational formats for developing mature citizenship' (Ahlin, 2010: 255). However, unlike conventional perspectives on leadership, where (corporate) citizenship is often portrayed as aligning oneself with the visions, missions, and values espoused by (senior) manager-leaders, the mature citizenship that de Maré speaks of involves challenging the s*tatus quo*, particularly where the status quo maintains structures that are unjust, unequal, and unthinking.

In small (group analytic) group therapy, drawing attention to the socio-political is often interpreted as a defence against the anxiety of exploring the personal/interpersonal. I contend that focusing on the individual/interpersonal in experiential groups, on executive education programmes, is a defence against the anxiety of exploring the structural inequalities that pervade our institutions and organisations (echoes of Di Angelo's fragility, outlined above). De Maré viewed coming together in large groups to explore structural inequity as a way of humanising our 'institutions and organisations' (ibid.: 255).

De Maré's original recommendation for the frequency and duration of large group sessions was 'daily meetings of one and a half to two hours duration over a period of two or more years' (de Maré, in Lenn and Stefano, 2018: 67). In setting such an aspiration, de Maré was making the point that working in this way takes time and commitment.[3] De Maré set up a weekly large group that met on Wednesdays for over a decade in the 1980s and 1990s. Whilst working with this group, de Maré realised that although the group of 20 regular participants was larger than a typical group analytic small group, the dynamics were appreciably different from the 'one-off' large groups that had become a feature of IGA and GASI trainings, conferences, and symposia, where there were often hundreds of participants. Consequently, de Maré began to differentiate the median group from the large group. For the purposes of this chapter, I am adopting von Sommaruga Howard's notion

of the 'larger group', where 'one person's median is another person's large group' (von Sommaruga Howard, 2019). Von Sommaruga-Howard argues that it is not the size of the group, but the focus of attention that has most influence on what plays out. In the larger group, the focus is on the cultural and socio-political, whereas in the small group the 'family of origin is prefaced more prominently' (ibid.). I would build on this to argue that for the purposes of executive education it is more appropriate and useful to focus on the cultural and socio-political themes that emerge irrespective of whether the groups we find ourselves working with are small, median, or large.

De Maré came to view the median group as a useful space for developing the confidence to speak out in the large group. The median group is big enough to resist the familial comfort of the small group, but small enough to enable, over the course of ninety minutes, everybody to have a voice. Rachel Chazan, a participant in de Maré's Wednesday group, describes her involvement as 'more profound' than any of her 'small group experiences' (Chazan, 2001: 163). She argues that the median group 'is particularly suited for fostering and understanding man in society' (ibid.: 164), a place 'in which moral growth can take place' (ibid.: 194). I agree with Chazan when she argues 'it is likely that the large group, and particularly the ongoing median group furthers development of [one's] capacity' (ibid.: 194) for mature citizenship. My involvement in CLGDOS over the last five years has certainly catalysed a shift in my thinking/practice. For me, small and median experiential groups run along group analytic perspectives of the large group, provide participants with opportunities to develop the courage and confidence needed to speak up and speak out in other arenas. That is, to have a voice in the organisations and societies in which we work and live; to develop our capacity for mature citizenship. And in those spaces where we already have a voice, this involves becoming an ally to those who are prevented and/or struggling to finding theirs.

For de Maré, mature citizenship is not about the pursuit of harmony, consensus, or compromise, but rather it is about recognising and working with the differences we bring with a view to developing an understanding of how we might go on together without negating or concealing diversity. However, this does not rule out the potential for our ways of thinking to shift as we witness the testimony of others. De Maré's belief was that if we can share something of our differences and work with the energy borne of the frustration and hate, then we might find ourselves engaging in dialogue. We may never consider each other as friends, but we might experience a state of *koinonia*, that is, impersonal fellowship (de Maré et al., 1991/2018). For von Sommaruga Howard, *koinonia*, if we experience it at all, comes in 'waves that ebb and flow' and it is not a destination, but a possibility (von Sommaruga Howard, 2019). She argues that the large group is a space for 'challenging accepted hierarchies, enabling people to throw light on hidden social controls so that they cease to be invisible and can be thought about'. However, she further cautions that this 'can be seen as a subversive activity generating many defences' (ibid.). Maxwell,

another veteran of de Maré's Wednesday group, describes the experience of coming together to engage in dialogue:

> [T]he ultimate task for us was to discover at what stage dialogue would have done its work. When would we have transformed hatred? Gradually the realisation dawned on us that the work would never be completed, because there would never be a time when I, or anyone else, would be totally at one with life, and that, therefore, we would have to learn some form of dialogue with life, and with others, for the rest of our days.
>
> *Maxwell (2000: 40)*

The ambivalence and uncertainty, which von Sommaruga Howard and Maxwell contend is ever present in the larger group, resonates with my experience of organisational life. Involvement in the DMan and various group analytic trainings has influenced my way of working in experiential groups on executive education programmes. Consequently, we explore together the patterns of interaction that emerge in the classroom with a view to identifying what, if anything, is analogous to the patterns of interaction that we find ourselves caught up in at work. The explorations of enactments like the one outlined in the 'Dicks' narrative above are useful for experiencing practical judgement as a social, relational process. Lyndsey Stonebridge (2020), drawing the work of Hannah Arendt, argues that 'judgement… means moving and thinking between viewpoints' and it is essentially a 'social and political' activity, 'we cannot judge alone' (ibid.: viii). She contends:

> It's only by speaking of the inhumanity of our world across experiences, communities, faiths and borders that we can begin to humanise it. "However much we are affected by the things of the world," Arendt wrote, "however deeply they stir us and stimulate us, they become human for us only when can discuss them with our fellows."…We humanise what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking it we learn to be human.
>
> *(Stonebridge (2017: 21)*

Lessons from the larger group

> *The challenge then is to see all people (including oneself) as fully human, multidimensional, with strengths and flaws, to suspend judgment (based on preconceptions and surface level characteristics) and remain curious about others.*
>
> *Ajoy Datta (2021: 39)*

The role of the conductor/convenor is to participate

Foulkes uses the analogy of the orchestra conductor to describe the responsibilities one has as a group analyst/leader of a group. He argues that conventional

understanding of what a good leader does, that is, '*lead a group to a certain goal*', is the opposite of what a 'good therapist' does, and that is, '*to wean the group from its wish to be led*' (Ibid.: 54). Traditional psychodynamic and/or group analytic (Foulkes, 1948/2018) approaches discourage the conductor/convenor from overly sharing/participating, as this compromises the 'blank screen' they represent, on to which group members projections can be seen. In the larger group, the conductor/convenor's role is to participate fully to encourage dialogue that is 'on the level' (de Maré et al., 1991/2018), 'opening up the conversation in the interest of the emergence of new meaning' (Stacey, 2012: 153). *Approaches to conducting/convening larger groups provide useful lessons for leading in organisations and society*.

Larger groups facilitate the collective exploration of what it means to be human

Stonebridge, after Arendt, argues 'to think in dark times is not to retreat from the business of being human, but to discover new forms of humanity in dialogue with others—particularly with people whose beliefs you may not share' (Stonebridge, 2017: 21). The exercise of practical judgement is a social, relational process which along with sense-making and reflexivity contributes to reflexive curiosity. *The larger group is a space for the development of the capacity for reflexive curiosity.*

Learning to speak out in the larger group takes time

Confining working as a larger group to one or two sessions over the course of an EMBA/Masters programme is inadequate for supporting executive education students to scratch the surface of the cultural and socio-political contexts that they find themselves in, let alone to explore how they might go about playing into them in a way that might bring about more inclusive ways of learning, leading, and living. *Larger groups should be a regular fixture on executive education programmes.*

Small/median groups prepare participants for working in larger group

Von Sommaruga Howard argues that ongoing participation in a large group 'takes time, courage and practice' as one learns to cope 'with not getting an immediate response, chaotic feelings, and listening to what appears to make no sense' (von Sommaruga Howard, 2019).

She further argues that participation in a large group can often be 'difficult' to the point of feeling 'brutal' (ibid.). Small/median groups should be run along experiential lines, as a preparatory space for working in the larger group. *On a typical EMBA programme, for example, this might mean incorporating monthly small/median groups, of up to twenty participants, interspersed with quarterly large groups consisting of one or more cohorts over the duration of the programme.*

All voices must be represented

As stated throughout this chapter, taking a group analytic approach to experiential groups can be an anxiety-provoking experience. As Sinclair (2007) found, this can lead to students voting with their feet. However, after Sinclair walked away from the programme, several students approached her to ask her to continue to work with them. This she did, seeing this as a victory of sorts. However, segregation does little to develop the capacity for recognising and working with difference. As executive education practitioners and providers, we should avoid becoming the 'Dicks' who get in the way of dialogue. *Participation in experiential groups on executive education programmes should be core and not elective.*

Conductors/convenors are as prone to get caught up in the emotional tumult as anyone else

The 'capacity to think under emotional fire' (Clancy and Vince, 2019: 177) requires one to become more 'detached in one's involvement' (Elias, 1994). When one is too caught up in what is going on, it becomes difficult to think clearly. De Maré argues the rudimentary problem in large groups is the potential for 'mindlessness', where strong, visceral emotions need to be held and worked with if the group is to move from mindlessness to a space that encourages dialogue and koinonia (de Maré, 1985). *Having more than one person on the teaching team with knowledge and experience of working in this way is crucial.*

Leadership: A rejoinder

In a recent book review (Czarniawska, 2021), Barbara Czarniawska questions the need for leaders in 'professionalized organizations' arguing that 'guides may be needed in an unknown terrain, and managers to create infrastructures aiding professionals' work', but it is the professional themselves that get things done. She argues that 'formal leaders are increasingly responsible for marketing' and wonders whether '"good leadership" in present times is limited to a task of representation' (ibid.: 4). In the remainder of this chapter, taking Czarniawska's thoughts as a provocation for reflection, I'll take another reflexively curious look at leading and leadership by drawing on the thinking of Foulkes, Stacey, de Maré, and von Sommaruga-Howard.

Foulkes

Foulkes' most comprehensive treatise on leading and leadership is a paper he wrote in response to a presentation he made at the American Group Psychotherapy Association Conference in New York in 1949 (Foulkes, 1964: 54). Foulkes felt that his conference address had been misunderstood, with delegates thinking he was

advocating 'leaderless groups' (a concept that was popular in the US at the time), when what he had hoped to do was proffer an alternative perspective on leading (in group analytic settings). The conference audience didn't seem to be able (and/or desire) to grasp the idea of the conductor as both participant and leader at the same time. In the subsequent paper, Foulkes argues that group analysis is not something that the therapist does, but rather it is a form of therapy 'by the group, of the group, including its conductor' (Foulkes, 1990: 3). Foulkes is at pains to distance and differentiate the approach to leading that he is advocating from the authoritarian/totalitarian notions of leadership that dominated the socio-political landscape of his time. The adoption of the descriptor 'conductor' was a means of enabling him to explain the responsibilities one has as a group analyst/leader of a group, and to 'express more specifically when the group analyst acts as a leader and when he does not' (ibid.: 54).

Foulkes argued that whether leading (therapeutic) groups, organisations, or nations, the 'qualities required on the part of the conductor [leader] have an essential affinity to education according to the concepts of a democratic way of life for good world citizenship' (ibid.: 62). For Foulkes, these qualities include a good grasp on reality, the ability to resist the temptation to 'play God' and having a respect for the group that enables and supports group members to become 'self-responsible individuals' (ibid.: 63). For Foulkes, this involves being co-operative, but not submissive; treating people 'on equal terms'; being self-confident and modest with the courage to lead that is underpinned by a developed sense of 'social responsibility' (ibid.: 64). The conductor has authority and power in the moment, as well as being representative of those in authority and power. This leaves the conductor open to unconscious group fantasies, where the group might place the conductor on the pedestal of 'omniscient and omnipotent' saviour. For Foulkes, when this happens, the conductor must accept the position with a view to gradually weaning the group off the 'need for authoritative guidance' (ibid.: 60). He argues:

> He does not step down but lets the group, in steps and stages, bring him down to earth. The change which takes place is that from a leader of the group to a leader in the group…the result of an all-important decrescendo move as regards authority on the part of the leader.
>
> *Ibid.: 60–61*

Foulkes' thinking resonates with my own sense-making in that it challenges the splitting of leadership from management that pervades mainstream and popular management literature (Zaleznik, 1977; Kotter, 2008; and Czarniawska, 2021). In the working definition of leadership shared in Chapter 2, I see leadership as a relational phenomenon that involves making sense of the social context in which one finds oneself and articulating an understanding and/or next step that people

recognise (themselves in) and in so doing come to recognise one as a leader. And I see management as the social process of coping with the context and the intended and unintended consequences of working with the new understanding and/or taking that next step. However, I contend that one cannot separate the two, as it is only in the process of coping that one can make sense of the context and come to form the understanding and/or next step that is articulated and recognised as leading/leadership. Leadership and management are two sides of the same coin. For me, this resonates with Foulkes' differentiation between two types of authority – 'executive' authority, which remains the responsibility of the conductor and 'expert' authority where the responsibility for what happens during the sessions is shared with and amongst group members (Hutchinson, 2009: 356).

'Executive' authority, which in group analytic parlance is often referred to as 'dynamic administration' (Behr and Hearst, 2005 – see Chapter 7), includes contracting, making 'decisions about membership', setting boundaries, and maintaining 'the setting' (Hutchinson, 2009: 356). The equivalent in organisational/educational settings would be employment contracting, hiring, and firing, ensuring that people adhere to policies, processes, and procedures, and creating and maintaining safe physiological and psychological environments. The exercise of 'expert' authority in group analytic terms involves facilitating the group to get on with the task and to intervene when the group gets stuck and/or gets in each other's way. The exercise of 'expert' authority in organisational/educational settings is something akin to Czarniawska's leaving the 'professionals' to get on with it and only intervening when necessary (Czarniawska, 2021), and the paradox of control that Streatfield points to (see Chapter 6). Foulkes also points out that the exercises of 'expert' and 'executive' authority are inseparable processes. This brings me to the first lesson from Foulkes.

> **Lesson 1** – Leading involves living with the paradox of being in charge, but not in control, and navigating the imaginary poles of 'executive' and 'expert' authority.

Moreover, promotion to administrative/management/leadership roles all too often removes managers from the day-to-day activities that attracted them to the profession in the first place. If you find yourself removed from people you lead, then it is important to create spaces where the 'frank disclosure of mutual feeling, reaction and attitude is encouraged' (Foulkes, 1964: 53), shared, and thought about.

> **Lesson 2 –** Leading involves convening spaces where people can regularly get together to reflexively explore the emerging patterns all are co-creating and hold each other to account.

Stacey, de Maré, and von Sommaruga Howard

Drawing on Stacey, de Maré, and von Sommaruga-Howard, there are three aspects of Foulkes' thinking on leading and leadership that I would like to contest/build on. First, although Foulkes accepts that, as a group conductor/leader, one is influenced by the group whilst simultaneously influencing, I contend that he downplays the significance of the power differential between conductor and group members, at the same time as overplaying the level of control that the conductor has over how others might respond to his (gestures of) authority. Second, Foulkes' ambivalence regarding the potential for group process to become a form of coercive persuasion (Schein, 1961) increases the risk of difference being marginalised and excluded, rather than accepted and worked with. And third, as outlined above, small group analytic interpretations based on family histories and individual group members' childhood experiences (an enduring tenet of Foulkes' thinking/practice that Farhad Dalal (1998) describes as belonging to 'orthodox Foulkes') are as unhelpful as they are inappropriate for groups in organisational settings. I contend that the median/large group perspective of de Maré and von Sommaruga-Howard is a more useful way of encouraging more democratic ways of working and for the promotion of a more socially just world.

Shortly after taking on a full-time academic position at University of Hertfordshire (UH), where I'd been working as Head of Leadership and Organisational Development for the previous decade, the opportunity to take a novel approach to a not uncommon situation arose. Staff survey results found that almost fifty per cent of staff felt that it was 'unsafe' to 'speak out'. My involvement in previous staff survey processes had left me all too aware of the tendency for such findings to be taken at face value and subsequently acted upon in ways that not only generated little insight but also counterintuitively compounded the very injustices and inequities they set out to address. During a departmental meeting in which the survey results for the business school were discussed, several colleagues placed the blame for the 'speaking out' finding on the behaviours of the senior management team (SMT). The SMT member, who had joined us to share the results, pointed to these comments as evidence that colleagues seemingly had little problem speaking out. Stalemate!

A few days later, during an impromptu corridor conversation with the member of the SMT, I suggested that if we, as a community, were serious in our intentions to address this finding, then a useful next step would be to gain some understanding of why colleagues had responded to the survey question in the way they had. I offered to conduct a series of whole School meetings to collectively explore this finding. Offer accepted, I invited a colleague to co-conduct, and we set up three, ninety-minute, face-to-face sessions. Following these weekly sessions, colleagues expressed an appetite to continue to meet. Consequently, we scheduled a series of monthly sessions for the remainder of that academic year.

Speaking out 1

The fifth 'Speaking Out' session is due to start in 15 minutes. The number in attendance at each of the previous four meetings has been good, with 26, 25, 24, and 18 participants, respectively. It has taken me 35 minutes to arrange the seating. It is not that I am slow and/or particularly methodical, it is just that I had to (i) scrabble around adjacent rooms to gather sufficient chairs for the anticipated number of attendees, (ii) work within the confines of the relatively small, rectangular room we have been allocated for this session to arrange 26 of the collected chairs into as approximate a circle as possible, and (iii) stack the remaining 6 'extras' at the front of the room in case attendance exceeds that of previous meetings.

Ten minutes before we are due to start my co-conductor arrives. He informs me that one of the participants called him the previous evening to let him know that they may have 'made a mistake'. The 'mistake' that the participant feels they may have made is in telling members of the senior management team (some of whom are regular attendees of the 'Speaking Out' sessions) that he would no longer honour the Chatham House Rule the 'Speaking Out' group had agreed to adhere to in relation to not attributing comments made in the session, outside of the session. The participant asked my co-conductor whether this jeopardised their ongoing participation in the group, and my co-conductor had responded that this would be something to discuss with the group at the next meeting. As the participants start to trickle in, it becomes obvious that the extra seating will not be required today. The participant who feels they have made a mistake arrives and takes a seat in the circle, bringing the attendance to four, plus me and my co-conductor. The fewest number of senior management attendees at previous meetings is seven. For this one, there are none!

The psychotherapist and group analyst, Morris Nitsun, takes issue with Foulkes' assertion that the goal of the conductor is the 'gradual relinquishing…of authority' (Nitsun, 2009: 327). He argues that there are three problems with this. First, that Foulkes' description of the transfer of authority is too linear. For Nitsun, the process of relinquishing authority is much messier and more problematic than Foulkes would have us believe. He contends that Foulkes glosses over the ambivalence that might be present for both the conductor and group members when negotiating authority. That is, the ambivalence of the conductor who might not want to give up his/her authority so readily and the ambivalence of the group that might reject or try to take authority before the conductor is willing to relinquish it. Nitsun also argues that there are occasions – 'times of crisis', 'group impasse or conflict', etc. – when it would be inappropriate for the conductor to relinquish their authority (ibid.: 328). Second, Foulkes discourages any sign in the group of 'dependent, aggressive, and erotic…responses to authority, [seeing them] as obstructions' (ibid.: 340). Nitsun argues that such challenges must be acknowledged and worked with rather than marginalised. And third, Foulkes underestimates the difference between conductor and group members, arguing that 'the conductor has the training, the

experience and indeed the authority, which the group members do not have and to pretend otherwise would be disingenuous' (ibid.: 329). For Nitsun, disingenuous notions of democracy can 'conflate difference, encouraging a spurious sense of equality' (ibid.: 329).

I disagree with Nitsun when he argues that Foulkes is advocating the relinquishment of all authority by the group conductor. As noted above, Foulkes differentiates between 'executive' authority, which remains the responsibility of the conductor, and 'expert' authority where the responsibility for what happens during the sessions is shared with and amongst group members (Hutchinson, 2009: 356). However, from the complexity perspective, I agree that Foulkes' linear understanding of leading/conducting, where the leader/conductor gets to decide how and when to wean a group from its dependency for a leader, is problematic. As illustrated in Vignette 1, myself and my co-conductor had little, if any, control over either the 'mistake' that was made by the 'Speaking Out' group participant or how this would subsequently play out across the rest of the group. As outlined in Chapter 4, Norbert Elias (1978) sees power not as something that one person possesses and another doesn't, 'as if it were a thing he carried in his pocket…but rather as 'a structural characteristic of…all human relationships' (Elias, 1978: 74). Elias used the term 'figurations' to describe the dynamic processes of power that we find ourselves caught up in, where the differential, will never be 100/0 … nor will it ever be 50/50 and can shift and switch. I also agree that it is disingenuous for those in positions of authority to downplay the inequality in power differentials that exist in hierarchical structures, but this should not prevent us from encouraging more 'democratisation of the group process' (Nitsun, 2009: 329) in our own institutional settings.

In my experience, the deference paid to senior leaders in organisational settings can be problematic as it all too often means that whatever the chief executive officer (CEO) says goes. The corollary is that the responsibility for responding to crises is also seen as the CEO's responsibility alone; the precursor to a form of 'learned helplessness' (Maier and Seligman, 1976) in the group. I see this tension echoed in Czarniawska's call for 'guides in unknown terrain' and Nitsun's call for 'an authority figure [in] times of crisis'. However, in contrast with Czarniawska and Nitsun, however, in contrast with Nitsun, I contend that unknown terrains and times of crisis call for more collective endeavour rather than less. I concur with Nitsun when he argues that challenges to authority should not be shut down or marginalised as this is where the real work begins. Wrestling with challenges/challengers is how we learn. If dissent is absent, leaders need to be vigilant.

Lesson 3 – Leading involves enduring and working with the personal attacks and expressions of strong emotion that can surface when the power differential is in one's favour and anxiety is high.

Speaking out 2

The 11th 'Speaking Out' session has just ended. The participant who made the 'mistake', outlined in Vignette 1, is absent. This is the first session they have missed. In session ten, they only joined the group for the last 30 minutes and did not say a single word.

Within the first 10 minutes of each of the first four 'Speaking Out' sessions, they were invariably the first to speak and their contribution consisted of a 10-minute restating of the staff survey findings that in their opinion were wholly and solely of the SMT's making. They met each of my attempts to encourage them to share something of their personal experience with the group much like a seasoned politician might. That is, they would acknowledge my invitation before going back to quoting the statistics, always adding that they had never experienced a situation as bad as this in all their time at the University. During these early sessions, we also witnessed some very frank, honest, and emotional testimony from colleagues. Group members expressed varied reasons for not experiencing the business school as a space in which they felt safe to speak out. For some, it was the potential repercussions (perceived or real) of speaking truth to power/authority/hierarchy. For others, it was due to feeling excluded as a person of colour, and/or as a woman, and/or as a member of professional (that is, not academic) staff. And for others, it was the fear of rejection (perceived or real) from their peers. The group agreed that there were clearly questions and issues for SMT to address, but equally we were able to acknowledge our own part in co-creating and maintaining the dynamics we were all struggling with.

After the fifth 'Speaking Out' session, described in Vignette 1, Covid hit. The decision was taken to move the sessions online and to increase their regularity from monthly to fortnightly. During the first three 'Speaking Out' sessions – six, seven, and eight – via Zoom, each time our colleague attempted to launch into their usual recounting of the statistics, several participants 'playfully' chastised them with comments like 'Come on, X, I've nearly filled my "X Bingo"" card. As co-conductors, my colleague, and I did little to directly discourage these micro-aggressions. The absence of SMT members, following the mistake, remained a cause of consternation, with their lack of attendance regularly commented on by group members. Behind the scenes, my co-conductor and I worked hard to encourage SMT members to return to the group. After missing five sessions, the Dean of School did return. During the first two sessions following their return, our colleague was silent and absent, respectively. Had we, as a group, shifted from scapegoating SMT to scapegoating them?

The above experience resonates strongly with a vignette that Foulkes (1948) shares. Entitled, 'An-other Absent Member as Scapegoat', Foulkes reflects on his interactions with a group he identifies as Group P, and a group member he identifies as Mr K. Mr K is frequently absent from the group. Foulkes goes on to report how after having 'almost to force' this 'obstinate character' to rejoin the

group, the group responds by voicing 'an almost universal dislike of him' as he 'is different from the others, more extraverted and aggressive, but also in "class" [and] occupation' (ibid.: 129–130). The ongoing interactions that Foulkes describes involve group members, 'mostly professional men, intellectuals or would be' (ibid.: 130), explaining to Mr K that their dislike of him 'is their own problem, not his', with one member declaring that 'I dislike you because I am an awful snob'(ibid.:130). Foulkes concludes his vignette with – 'Mr. K is now an accepted member of the group and is him-self more quietly and unobtrusively co-operative' (ibid.: 130).

The parallels between Foulkes' Mr K and our experience in the 'Speaking Out' group are still quite raw for me. I find what Foulkes appears to regard as Mr K's socialisation and acceptance by the group, with Mr K now being 'more quietly and unobtrusively co-operative' (ibid.: 130), as neutering and oppressive. There is insufficient information about Mr K and Group P to qualify this charge, but Foulkes' vignette helps me to make a better sense of the potential for group members to experience group process as a form of coercive persuasion (Schein, 1961), more commonly referred to as 'brain washing'. The process Foulkes describes echoes the received wisdom in conventional leadership literature that all employees should 'align' with the vision, values, and strategic direction of their organisations. From this perspective, difference and dissent are often seen as a form of employee dysfunction, a disease to be cured, often labelled as 'resistance to change'.

Also, in the Mr K vignette, Foulkes' focus is on what might be going on for Mr K, which Foulkes identifies as 'conflicting attitudes towards money, businessmen, working for one's living, or not having to work' (Foulkes, 1948: 130). This narrow focus ('orthodox' Foulkes) risks the work of the group becoming the 'taming' of Mr K rather than the exploration and negotiation of the cultural and socio-political difference that he and everybody else bring. This represents what Stacey (2003) regards as a distinct difference between group analysis and complex responsive processes of relating. Stacey 'distinguishes between the tradition of thought which led to the psychoanalytic emphasis on intra-psychic processes' and the perspective of complex responsive processes where the 'emphasis [is] on interdependent individuals in which the individual and the social are the same pro-cesses' (Stacey, 2012: 157). In short, rather than exploring what might be going on for the individual, we might more usefully explore what we are all collectively co-creating and sustaining. In Vignette 2, the silencing of the colleague who made the 'mistake' says less about them and more about how we as a community contributed to silencing the colleagues who shared their experience of feeling unsafe to speak out as a person of colour, a woman, a member of professional staff, etc.

Lesson 4 – Leading involves negotiating a way of going on together that explores and works with difference and guards against scapegoating and the exclusion of individuals and/or groups.

Speaking out 3

During the final session of the 'Speaking Out' group, having worked together for 15 months, across 2 academic years, the conversation unsurprisingly turned to reflections on our experience of being in the group. One of the participants asked the Dean of School what he had found most surprising. After a relatively long silence, he answered that he was surprised by how racist the school had been shown to be.

As outlined above, corporate citizenship, in conventional terms, involves aligning oneself with the organisational vision and values espoused by (senior) leaders. The mature citizenship that de Maré speaks of involves mutual recognition and working with the differences we bring to negotiate a way of going on together that acknowledges and explores diversity and the differentials of power and privilege at play. Something akin to what Ingram's and Abraham's (2015), drawing on Bhabha's conception of a 'third space', describe as a community dialogue where the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of the elements that are neither the 'One…nor the Other…but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both' (Bhabha, 1994: 28 in Ingram and Abraham, 2015: 140). For Ingram and Abraham:

> The 'third space' does not emerge from combining two dominant social fields and picking and choosing aspects of both to fuse together; it is the development of something new altogether in relation to the confrontation of the incommensurate aspects of two fields.
>
> *Ibid.: 152*

Group analyst Martin Weegmann draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of 'horizons' to argue that our understanding of our prejudices 'emerges in the play of dialogue, in conversations which are neither predictable nor possessed by either party' (Weegmann, 2018: 21). Paraphrasing Gadamer, Weegmann argues that when we become aware of our horizons and the horizons of others 'alternative organisations of meaning become possible and with this can arise a greater understanding of the context within which the other's meaning exists' (ibid.: 20). Gadamer (2013) described such a shift as a 'fusion of horizons', which, as Weegmann notes, 'is not an end point but is part of many further, in-complete acts of understanding' (Weegmann, 2018.: 20). Weegmann goes on to argue:

True understanding and change necessitate some awareness of our own horizons and a capacity to decentre from them in order to be influenced by the horizons of the other. This decentring is relative since we cannot but remain ourselves when we encounter someone else or another culture. Yet that encounter can help, one hopes, to modify our stance, even our identity, depending on what is at stake in that encounter (ibid.:21).

Lesson 5 – Leading involves reflexively re-examining our own prejudice, privilege, and praxis.

This is not to idealise large group/community processes of getting together to think. Alongside the testimonies of discrimination and micro-aggression based on race, colleagues also shared highly emotional accounts of direct and indirect bullying, made possible in part by the ever-increasing surveillance and monitoring that educational institutions have become subject to, much of which is self-imposed. Maggie Nelson (2021), drawing on the work of psychotherapist, Adam Phillips, argues that we can never be free of surveillance, which makes it all the more important to create spaces 'wherein we can temporarily suspend its grip, and practice a certain fugitivity from the "cops in the head," as Augusto Boal, founder of the Theater of the Oppressed, put it…The cops may be in our heads, Boal wrote, but "the headquarters of these cops are in the external reality. It is necessary to locate both the cops and their headquarters"'(Nelson, 2021: 44). The work of the 'Speaking Out' group was in part about creating a space in which we could explore the cops and their headquarters. A space for working with difference, not as a means of neutering management or coercing staff, but as a means of promoting dialogue and the koinonia/fusion of horizons afforded in the third space. It would be fair to say that the testimonies of colleagues who shared their experiences of racism and racist behaviour within the school, during the 'Speaking Out' group sessions, 'decentred' horizons, and were the catalysts for several changes being introduced across the School to promote inclusivity. The same cannot be said with regards to the testimonies relating to bullying.

The (perceived or real) lack of action taken by the SMT in this regard was sufficient reason for my co-conductor to step down from the group. For him, continued participation would mean colluding with people and behaviours that he could not condone. Those in positions of authority often have greater power chances than others and this provides undue influence over which stories are taken up and which are not, at least in the short term. And this brings me to the final theme that Czarniawska draws attention to – representation. For me, representation is a key leadership responsibility, consisting of not only the marketing and PR that Czarniawska speaks of but also the engagement with and inclusion of others' stories in the policies, processes, and procedures of the organisations we lead. As argued throughout this chapter, leadership is about mutual recognition, and this involves bringing diverse voices into some form of communion with each other. If people cannot recognise something of themselves in the narrative, then what's being practised is not leadership, but rather authoritarianism and/or coercion. This leads to compliance and/or obedience, not followership. Leadership is not about people adopting your story; it is about collaboratively developing more democratic and socially just ways of working that articulate something of everyone's story.

Lesson 6 – Leading involves facilitating the co-creation of more democratic and socially just ways of working where all stories matter, and all voices are valued and heard.

Closing reflections

The leadership lessons identified here are not offered as a prescription, but as a provocation. Foulkes' perspective has much to offer leaders. His sense-making is both of its time and ahead of its time. The implications of understanding leadership as a social, relational phenomenon, where the leader is in charge, but not in control, are as applicable to leading groups in organisational settings as they are to conducting therapeutic groups. The conductor's/leader's task is one of living with the uncertainty of not knowing and trusting the group (in Czarniawska's terminology, the 'professionals') to get on with the task at hand. Stacey builds on this to provide useful insights into power relations, processes of inclusion and exclusion and working with difference. The large group perspective, developed by de Maré and built on by von Sommaruga-Howard, further clarifies the need for leaders to encourage the co-creation and maintenance of a third space, where dissent and disagreement are not only voiced, but also where we can hold each other to account and challenge the hidden social controls (both the cops and their headquarters) that might be hampering our attempts to bring about a more democratic and socially just world. In other words, leading involves creating spaces where we can learn what it means to be a citizen in the world.

Working on this chapter has enabled me to do several things. First, to be reflexively curious about my practice as a convenor of experiential groups. Second, to engage with the thinking of fellow practitioners who are grappling with psychodynamic and/or group analytic ways of working in educational and organisational settings. Third, it has enhanced my understanding of why Stacey was drawn to group analysis in the first place and why colleagues continue to take a group analytic approach to working with experiential groups on the DMan.

However, as I argue above, approaches to experiential groups that draw on individual psychodynamic and/or group analytic perspectives miss the mark somewhat. Group analytic approaches to experiential groups based on lessons from the larger group are not only more useful and appropriate but they are also more generalisable to learning, leading, and living.

Finally, writing this chapter enabled me to reflect on our initial responses as a teaching team to the 'Dicks' incident with a little more empathy. In the time, we had available, there was little we could have usefully done on that Sunday afternoon. This points to the importance of heeding the lessons from the larger group outlined above. Awareness of the cultural and socio-political patterns of interaction that we are all caught up in offers the potential for transformation. And if change happens at all, it starts with shifts in the conversation (Shaw, 2002), the silent conversation we have with ourselves and the collective sense-making we engage in

with others. Finding one's feet in small/median experiential groups prepares us for speaking out in larger experiential groups. And finding one's voice in the larger group prepares us for speaking out when we witness a misuse of power and/or an unchecked application of privilege by members of dominant groups in our workplaces and communities. That's not with a view to censuring others or closing the conversation down, but rather with the intention of sharing our experiences, encouraging dialogue, recognising each other, enhancing mutual understanding, negotiating difference, and developing koinonia.

Notes

1 My involvement in the *Creating Large Group Dialogue* programme and research community has kindled an interest in citizenship, that is, how do we bring more, diverse voices into the conversations we have in organisations and society? I am currently in the process of writing a companion text to this one, *Organisational Development in Practice: A Complexity Approach* (Flinn, 2024, forthcoming), in which I have the space to explore these themes in some depth.
2 Interestingly, the DMan does provide sufficient time (spread over three years) and appropriately qualified staff (trained group analysts) to work therapeutically, but as Mowles argues, this is not the purpose of experiential groups on executive education/research programmes (Mowles, 2017a: 505).
3 What seems like an unrealistic commitment for most communities, let alone those in organisational settings, it is interesting to note that the in the programme that Revans ran for GEC in 1970s, action learning sets met 'once every week to spend a full day in close comradeship' (Revans, 1977).

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9

NO RECIPES, JUST RULES OF THUMB

Introduction

As this is the final chapter, it is tempting to provide some form of synopsis of the preceding pages. However, as this might discourage the type of engagement I am looking to encourage, I am going to resist. So:

- If you have arrived here having not yet read the rest of the book, read it. It is not overly long, it's accessible, and you will (I hope) find it interesting enough to reward you for the investment of time and energy. And,
- If you have arrived here having read it, I hope that it catalysed your own reflexive curiosity and that you *did* find it interesting.

My motivation for writing the first edition of this book was to offer managers, students, and leadership development practitioners an insight into the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2001; Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey and Mowles, 2016; Mowles, 2022) – the complexity approach of the book's title – and to share something of the influence that this thinking continues to have on my practice. In my closing reflections to the first edition, I commented that contemporary writing on leadership had something of a 'back to the future' feel about it. At the time, many authors, both conventional (Kellerman, 2012) and critical (Kempster and Carroll, 2016), were calling for leader-managers to take account of people and planet, as well as profit, recalling the principle of stewardship that was integral to the management education offered by the first business schools in the 1880s (Khurana, 2007). One could argue that in some quarters, during the intervening period between editions, this call has morphed into a primal scream, with epithets like 'responsible' (Saks, 2022)

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and 'sustainable' (Murphy, 2022) prefixing many of the current publications on leadership and leadership development.

The view that whatever we do, and however great our power chances might be in the doing of it, we cannot control and/or predict the future, is nothing new, irrespective of the illusory stories of instrumental rationality and deceptive certainty that continue to populate conventional literature. Taking experience seriously involves acknowledging that we, as human beings, whether we like it or not, need each other – we are interdependent. If one accepts that what we refer to as organisations are not systems but complex responsive processes of relating, that is, patterns of interaction between interdependent human beings, simultaneously co-operating and competing to get things done together, then the focus needs to shift from 'who-am-I, and-what-am-I-doing?', to 'who-are-we, and what-are-we-doing?'.

During the Q & A at the March 2021 launch of his book, *The New Power University: The social purpose of higher education in the 21st century* (Grant, 2021), Jonathan Grant was asked for his views on leadership development. The concluding sentence of his answer – 'So if I had a magic wand, I would probably overnight get rid of all of those management courses and replace them with community organising courses' – resonates with what I find myself doing differently since publication of the first edition – see Chapter 8. As leader-managers we are important players in organisational life, but we are not the only players, and leader-manager is but one of the many roles we play, in work, at home, and in the wider community. In the companion text to this one – *Organisational Development in Practice: A Complexity Approach* (Flinn, 2024) – I will explore what taking a complexity approach means for all in organisational settings – 'executives' and 'experts' – including the responsibilities we have as citizens of the world (de Maré et al, 1991/2018). In the meantime, I leave you with the rules of thumb that I think are useful for leader-managers, students/learners, and leaders of leadership development/executive education, respectively.

No recipes, just rules of thumb

Leader-managers

1 If you must differentiate between management and leadership, think of leadership as making sense of the context in which you find yourself (and articulating a next step that others recognise and support), and of managing as coping with that context (and the intended and unintended consequences of the next step). However, it is in the process of coping that one makes sense of the context, so management and leadership, leading and managing, are two sides of the same coin, they occur simultaneously and cannot be split. This is one of the many paradoxes of organisational life.
2 Leadership is a social and relational phenomenon. It is through our recognition of others that we come to be recognised as leaders. You will not always be able to recognise, or be recognised by, everybody (articulate a next step that all agree

with), but this does not mean that we should exclude those who do not recognise us (disagree with the next step).

3 Do all that you can to maintain an awareness of how things are (the day-to-day operational realities), recognising that this becomes more and more difficult the bigger and more complex an organisation becomes and the higher one rises in the corporate hierarchy. De Haan and Kasozi (2014) recommend inviting as many people as is usefully possible into the decision-making process, while Dunning and Hughes (2013) contend that greater reality congruence means fewer unintended consequences. However, taking a complexity approach means keeping in mind that (i) you might reduce the number of unintended consequences, but never to zero; (ii) some unintended consequences turn out to be welcome; and (iii) it only takes one. In other words, 'small differences can escalate into major, completely unpredictable changes, so creating new forms and destroying others at the same time' (Stacey and Mowles, 2016: 297).
4 Organisations are not systems, they are patterns of interaction between people, and as such they cannot be controlled, stepped outside of, or steered in a direction of choice.
5 There is instrumentality in some technical aspects of the leader-manager role, but when it comes to people, there is no recipe. The capability that one might usefully develop is reflexive curiosity and this involves the capacities for sense-making, reflexivity, and practical judgement.
6 Don't be an asshole (James, 2014). And if you already have the asshole's sense of entitlement or know that you will effortlessly acquire it, should you attain a position of authority; then do everyone a favour and stay away from roles that put you in charge of people. And if you do get to be a chief executive officer (CEO), enjoy the trappings and any accompanying pomp and ceremony, but remember, just because the business that you work for makes vast profits doesn't mean that you are entitled to an inordinately bigger share of the pot than every other employee who has contributed to this success.

Students/learners

1 Take your experience seriously. Compare and contrast the theories, models, and frameworks you encounter on leadership development programmes with your lived experience. If there is a mismatch, rather than simply thinking that you have it wrong, challenge what you hear and read and look to/for perspectives that resonate with your reality – see Point 2.
2 If you are asked to complete a piece of (academic) writing, not only read mainstream and popular management literature but also engage with critical, complexity, and alternative perspectives – see Point 1. And remember, all the glistens are not to be found in Gold *et al*. (2010), nor in Carmichael *et al*. (2011) or Dalton (2010). Textbooks often must sacrifice depth for breadth leaving them light on critique and alternative points of view.

3 Do not rely on third-party interpretations of the work of others, including those interpretations of the work of others that I have made in this book; always go back to the original source and make up your own mind – see Points 1 and 2.

Leaders of leadership development/executive education

1 Be conscious of the potential for the programmes that you lead to be experienced as a form of coercive persuasion (Schein, 1961), whether this is your intention or not – see Chapter 3. Stacey argues that the 'aim of coercive persuasion is to break down the personalities of people and reconstruct them in ways that are chosen by the most powerful' (2012: 7). He maintains that this 'can never be ethical' and that he 'cannot see how it can have any legitimate place in organizational life' (ibid.: 7).
2 Whether we take a conventional, critical, or complexity stance in our thinking/practice, as leaders of leadership development we have a responsibility to share a plurality of thinking with programme participants (Flinn, 2011), not only to ensure that they develop sufficient cultural literacy to navigate the politics of organisational life but also to avoid the risk of replacing 'one hegemony with another' (Ford and Harding, 2007) – see Point 1.
3 Taking a complexity approach to leadership development involves practising reflexive curiosity, as well as encouraging it in others (see Points 1 and 2). This means regularly asking ourselves the questions 'who are we and what are we doing together', 'who are we becoming and is this useful to us and those around us?' This involves more than simply adding the current buzzwords to the titles of our programmes and/or articles and books.

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Note: Page references in *italics* denote figures, in **bold** tables and with "n" endnotes.