Self-focused Leadership from Language and Complexity Theory

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In a recent meeting of an ongoing group of my current and previous supervisees and students, where I am the leader, a struggle came up about how to manage the size of the group because it was getting too large. This prompted my thinking about the function of leadership and the growth of a system, which then led to some ideas about hierarchy and self focus.

As readers of this website and people who know me understand, my thinking is grounded in systems theory, from my niche of Bowen/Natural Systems theory and my understanding of language based on Maturana's theory of Autopoesis (see my article on supervision listed on the References page of this website). In the past, I have not emphasized as much how these ideas fit so well with Complexity theory, which is about self-organizing systems and which spans many diverse fields from Biology to Artificial life.

While all of these ideas and theories mesh very well and form an integrated foundation for my thinking and my daily work, I have not set the notion of self-focused leadership into that framework. While there are many models of leadership, I do not know of any, based in a systems theory and self-focus that incorporate the notion of language, which is a major link with Complexity theory. In this essay, I would like to briefly describe my ideas about leadership from this perspective.

It seems obvious that a leader leads others. The head of an organization takes charge and is in control generally of what happens with that organization internally and externally. An opposing assumption from systems theory, especially Complexity theory, is that a leader emerges from the dynamics of this self-organizing system and the overall process is in charge of what happens.

With this kind of thinking, no one component or person is autonomous or independent of anyone else in the organization. Every person is in relationship to everyone else and it is those relationships that are the primary determinants of who people are and how they function in the organization.

Given this assumption, attempts to find one's place in the system with a focus on others becomes problematic for many reasons. For one, the complexity of so many interconnected and constantly changing relationships makes it impossible for a person to ever find his/her place permanently. The fit is dynamic and always changing as it is part of a balance. Here one could think of a surfer riding a wave.

Not only is it impossible, but trying to orient self with a primarily other-focus can actually be detrimental. In a fun house at a carnival where the walls are not plumb, people

who try hard to stand up straight by looking at the walls, usually fall down. The premise of this model is that self-focus provides a better orientation for the individual person and ultimately for the larger system as a whole. This is true for the leader as well as for each person in the varying positions of the organization.

Let's see how this all makes sense from the example of my group and from the theories that inform my thinking.

Consistent with my thinking about leadership, I have clearly emerged as the leader in this group, partly by nature of my formal relationship with the people as supervisor or teacher, but more importantly as a function of the system. As I see it, the system organizes itself on an ongoing basis through various changes that maintain a stability around me in the leadership position.

Eleven years ago I invited all the people I had supervised to that point in my career, to a meeting to discuss where they were in their lives, particularly in relation to the work they had done with me. About 20 people came and this first group met three more times with decreasing numbers in attendance each time, until it finally stopped. I did this invitation again 3 years ago, and about 15 people came. However, this time the group has continued to meet twice a year and has no intention of stopping.

A non-emergent, non-systems model of leadership would see me as simply the leader of the group by my status and my actions in organizing this group. This would put me in a hierarchical position above the group members. This is a linear notion of my leadership impacting the group, without thinking that the group functioning determines my leadership. From Complexity theory it is possible to think of a leader in a hierarchical position that is not linear. This is the notion of systems organizing themselves in ways that result in hierarchical structures that are a function of how the systems maintain their own balance.

While it was certainly my idea to call these people together, in no way do I make them keep on coming to semi-annual meetings. I do not try to motivate them to come, offer them rewards for coming, or threaten negative consequences for not coming. They just come and so do I. The momentum of the evolving network draws all of us.

What do we do when we meet? We talk. It is an ongoing conversation about ourselves and the ideas that we share, based on my model that they have all experienced in working with me at some point before. This is the coordination in language from Maturana's concept of autopoesis in which human, living systems organize themselves to maintain their being alive.

Another aspect of a self-organizing system is growth. As it interacts with itself, it develops increasingly complex processes and may well grow. This growth, however, is not linear, in the sense of an organism adding on more components to its basic organization. Rather, the growth is part of the self-organizing dynamic of the system. In

order to continue to be itself, it must grow. The increasing interactions and complexification simply lead to growth.

One can see this process happening explicitly in language in this group of supervisees and students. At one of the meetings last year people began to ask whether this group would do anything, other than get together and talk about ourselves and these ideas. Shortly after that meeting it became clear that the next step in the development of this group was to include the "next generation." We defined this set of people as those had a "generational" relationship with me, namely, people who were being supervised by people who had been supervised by me.

This idea generated a lot momentum and a core group, a leadership sub-system, met to plan the next semi-annual meeting, named the "Next Generation" meeting. It surprised us all that at that meeting there were more next generation people than original members of the group. It was at that meeting that the question of growth came up. Do we now let more people in? Can we handle the size of the group, now about 30, in terms of space as well as just in being able to meet in a circle and have a discussion?

This is where I want to relate to specifically to this question and the logistical problem to be solved by using my model of self-focus leadership, based in Bowen theory and Maturana's theory about language that is part of Complexity theory.

While people had a variety of opinions about how to manage the size of the group, they looked to me for direction. From a non-systems leadership model, one would probably say it is simply my call as leader to make a decision. From my self-focused leadership model, it is important for me respond to this emergent issue from my position in the group as leader. I am in a hierarchical position, where the hierarchy and my position is a function of the system, not one that derives from a static and reified role of me as leader. From my model, an effective response would come from a focus on self, as this would maintain the integrity of the system through a hierarchical process that is not static.

This means I orient myself in the group through a focus on self, rather than on an assessment of what the group needs, which would be followed by a decision by me as leader for the group. I see this happening through language, where the best decision is one in which the coordination leads to the least obstruction of the momentum. As I look to myself, I need to look to my vision, and to my model that the vision is based on. This is language as I interact internally with myself in my thinking, and externally as I talk about what I think with the group.

Bowen theory's concept of Differentiation is critical here. Differentiation is the process of a living system defining itself continually in a fluid system as it maintains itself (not unlike autopoesis). Bowen added the notion of anxiety as a major dimension to this process of differentiation. To the extent an entity yields too much to anxiety in a system, it will lose more of its integrity and the overall level of functioning of the system will drop as that component loses its distinct contribution to the necessary dynamics for the whole system.

To the extent that I as leader in this group lose my own integrity by denying a hierarchical role and put this decision back on the group, the decision is compromised and leads to a less efficient group around the issue of size. The same thing happens if I am authoritative, and assert a decision to the group as other, from a rigid hierarchical position. I need to know my place, and I know that from my understanding of myself, in my lifetime patterns and in my patterns from this group.

By way of example specific to this group, Tom Schur's reactive pattern is to resist taking a hierarchical position and in that way impede the group's momentum. Here is where one can understand the link between the dynamics of language as coordination from Maturana, and Becker's notion of Potential and Limitation around existential anxiety.

I know that I operate from Limitation. That happens in this group as I defer to others with discounting statements like: 'I think (blank), but that is only my opinion and others probably know more than I do.' This kind of interaction becomes a pattern and then a fit, that gets in the way of the group's functioning, as it needs my leadership to move on. It is a coordination at a lower level of functioning as I continue to respond from Limitation and maintain this fit, due to the anxiety of taking charge (accepting potential) and then being vulnerable to someone disagreeing with me.

For the sake of balance and understanding, I want to also point out that it is the same dynamic of impedance for a leader operating from Potential. In this case the leader insists on imposing his/her positions, not able to tolerate the anxiety of people disagreeing and having to modify the position (accept limitation) while still being in charge.

As I say what I say in this group and people react, we have a conversation, which is a process of language. It is also coordination in language as I interact within myself with my thinking, which then leads to what I say out loud and then think again, in a recursive looping. In regard to leaders and groups, the vision is a critical dimension for the leader and for the group. As I see it, the vision is certainly a language process and one that is part of the coordination of the leader with him/her self and with the group as a whole. For me the leader does not "have" a vision in a reductionist sense of having something. Rather, the leader has a relationship with a vision, which is part of the coordination in language in the larger system.

It is my vision and my awareness of my relationship with my vision, that can help me track a way of thinking and acting as leader that does not yield too much toward Limitation. One very practical way to do this is simply to monitor how I think and speak, working to notice ideas in my head and words spoken aloud that come from Limitation. I withdraw credence from them, allow the anxiety they protect me from, and either rethink the idea, or rephrase what I have said.

Again, I want to emphasize that this concrete mechanism with language is not presented as a linear notion that will have a specific and positive effect. Rather, I am presenting it as a way of helping me keep my balance in a constantly moving system. I like to use the

image of focusing on the spinning of the inner wheel of a gyroscope to maintain the balance of the whole unit as it tilts back and forth responding to the changes in the larger environment, like water for a submarine or air for an airplane.

My current position about what to do about the increasing size of this group is that we need to not try to control it. We need to maintain the integrity of the group by restricting membership in the network to people who have a generational relationship with me, and see how the system organizes itself from here.

My hunch is that to the extent that I am able to operate less from an inhibiting position of Limitation, the momentum will facilitate others engaging with the group around the vision we share. Then, leaders will emerge with related visions around specific areas of interest which will lead to activities and projects. This would be part of the ongoing process of the system organizing itself and becoming more complex, as it deals with growth.

To summarize, the issue about managing the growth of this system as leader is not about managing the size, but of managing my self and the anxiety stimulated by that growth, through a focus on self in language. This can allow the maintenance of a functional hierarchy so the momentum of the system can continue to develop increasingly complex and adaptive structures as it continues to organize itself.