Book reviews

Relational Leading: Practices for dialogically based collaboration

Lone Hersted and Kenneth Gergen

Taos Institute Publications, 2013, 197pp, ISBN
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Review by Mark McKergow

Regular readers of *Inter*Action may remember that we
published Kenneth Gergen's article 'Relating with self and
others' last year (Gergen, 2013). As well as being a good
piece by a notable scholar of social construction, the article
was this journal's continuing desire to extend beyond the
strictly Solution-Focused to look at wider developments
relating to our field. Gergen is now back with Danish leader-
ship consultant Lone Hersted with a well-worked book about
leading and language.

There is an important clue in the title of the book – "Rela-
tional Leading". It might have been "Relational Leadership",
but of course this would be to reify the act of leading. The
authors assert at the start of the book that leading is not about
the 'leader', but (like meaning in Wittgenstein's view) is a
"skillful participation in the process of coordinated action".
This is an emergent process, where dialogue is constitutive
(makes things happen) rather than simply descriptive (a
comment on how things already are). Language and dialogue
are key tools for the leader to deploy skillfully in action with
others. However, this is not a philosophical endeavour – the
authors hope that the book "can serve as an inspiration and
preparation for leaders, consultants, and educators to partici-
pate, with care, in our every-day practices of communication".

The book sets out to be practical, and it succeeds in many

ways. After a crisp introduction to the ideas and the importance of language, the book visits a succession of topics – creating organisational culture, leading teams, organisational change, conflict and creativity. In each case, the book visits some typical situation where a leader is engaging in conversation with others, and looks at several options for how things might develop. These options are spelled out in detail, so we can enjoy the different twists and turns of human interaction. Of course, these options show more and less successful ways to construct a dialogue.

As a brief taster, this is an excerpt entitled 'Irritation at poor performance'. Claudia, a young and ambitious manager at a software company, finds that her people don't meet their deadlines and don't mention it either, perhaps hoping she won't notice. Claudia has tried to be clear about her expections but nothing is changing and she is now exasperated. What happens at the next staff meeting?

Option 1: ***Claudia:*** *"In our last meeting we talked about the efficiency of this group, and I expressed my strong opinion that you weren't really up to speed. As a group you move too slowly; you miss your deadlines; you aren't careful; and you slow down the entire business. Now I see by this last month's reports that you are still running behind, and no one even bothered to call this to my attention. Look, you guys, I was hired here to run a tip-top operation, and this isn't it! This makes me very disappointed and angry. Let me put it another way, if you don't get up to speed in this next period there are going to be some painful consequences, and some of you may be saying good-bye! Is this clear to everybody? Did anybody miss the message?"*

Option 2: ***Claudia:*** *"In our last meeting we talked about the work in our group, and I tried to make it clear that we weren't really up to speed. As a team we move too slowly; we miss our deadlines; and we slow down the entire business. Now I see by this last month's reports*

that we are still running behind, which isn't good at all. This makes me worried; our jobs could be at stake. We have a shared task here. So let me hear some thoughts from you; what can we do together in order to reach our deadlines? How can we help each other to reach our goals? Let's talk about this now."

We are then invited to reflect on the differences between the two options, how are they inviting the team members to participate and what this might lead to. This is positioned within a wider discussion about looking at such contexts in terms of what we are inviting and rejecting with our words, how to reject invitations from others into less collaborative exchanges and how to frame openings and closings.

These situations and options all make entertaining reading – particularly the more abrasive ones (which would stand as quite a good learning for how to build strife and lose trust very quickly!). There is a great deal of learning in all this – possibly much more than is actually discussed explicitly in the book. The level of the conclusions is quite general, and while these are perfectly valid I would have liked to see a more detailed examination of the language – for example the way in which Claudia is using 'I' and 'we' in the example above.

The book is easy to read and moves through a great range of ideas within its relatively short length (200 pages). There are also references at the end of each chapter for further reading and amplification. These come from many classic sources including the social constructionist canon (of course), the famous *Pragmatics* book by Janet Beavin (now Bavelas), Barbara Fredrickson, Karl Tomm, Michael White... but nothing at all from Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg or any other SF source.

On one hand I am a little puzzled by this – a training in SF would give leaders many 'how-to's' to respond constructively and skillfully in these kinds of contexts. On the other hand, I fear that this may be yet another sign of the disconnect we have unwittingly produced by being unwilling to talk about what we do with the same agility as doing it. The SF attitude

of a not-knowing stance is a valuable tool for leaders, but cannot be a satisfactory platform for an exploration of the skilled use of dialogue in workplaces where relationships last years rather than hours. Perhaps it is time for a wider examination of the ways that SF questions and responses invite participation and inclusion, rather than simply 'do what works'. This journal, and the forthcoming HESIAN research hub at the University of Hertfordshire, will be very good places to do this.

By the way, the book has appeared in a very well-priced Kindle version. So many of the books we review here are expensive, and it is very good to see ways to get hold of this interesting material without breaking the bank. Well done to the Taos Institute publishing arm.

Reference

Gergen, K. (2013). Relating with Self and Others. *Inter*Action-*The Journal of Solution Focus in Organisations, 5*(1), 9–25.

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