

Co-creative Leadership: An Integrated Approach towards Transformational Leadership

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Abstract. The classical understanding of team leadership is extremely difficult to sustain in times when complexity and dynamics have risen to such high levels that very few individuals can assimilate them. The success of team leadership requires the “participation of those already implicated” in the development and implementation of a solution – and therefore in the leadership process. How can this be achieved practically? It requires a leadership approach that allows each relevant perspective to be included, in a practical way, in the development of a common position, which can then be implemented collectively. Co-creative leadership creates this possibility – a transformational leadership approach that allows an organisation as a whole to adapt to its environment.

Keywords: leadership; transformation, institutional change, complex problem solving, systems theory, cybernetics, constructivism, communications theory, dialogue, semantics.

The central task of leadership is to work with different members of an organisation (colleagues, departments, etc.) towards a common, goal-oriented action. Many organisations and leaders fail in this task.

As we shall see, the main reason for this is that in many organisations, individuals and departments do not act together but next to or even against each other. A large part of an organisation’s power of action is not directed towards its actual purpose but is rather used up in the elimination of internal differences relating to differing perspectives (convictions of how the organisation should best act). According to a central thesis, this invariably is not intentional but happens because, as a rule, only an apparent clarity regarding the common goal exists. Every individual, every department, and every unit in the organisation develops differing perspectives of their specific environment – on the basis of their own logic, rationality, interests, and motives, etc. These interpretations frequently conflict with one another so

that the organisation's ability as a whole to adapt, operate, and achieve success is decidedly inhibited. The main reason for this difficulty lies in the prevailing understanding of leadership which is still strongly rooted in traditional, hierarchical management thinking. This does not allow for the productive use of these differing perspectives but destroys the resulting complexity through hierarchical power.

In all management situations and problematic circumstances within an organisation, the aim is to develop the likeliest possible solution, take a decision based upon this solution, and according to this, finally take collective action. Much of the time, this happens in such a way that an individual (who by virtue of his/her position has the authority to make decisions) gives preference to a particular solution and carries it through by trying to oblige the participants to implement it. Management consultants are often made instrumental for this purpose.

This classic understanding of leadership is extremely difficult to sustain in times when complexity and dynamics have risen to such high levels that very few individuals can assimilate them. Increasingly, leadership can only be successful if the organisation as a whole develops a greater degree of adaptability and number of potential solutions. However, this requires the participation of those already implicated in the development and implementation of a solution.

How can this practically be achieved? It requires a leadership approach that allows the various perspectives relevant to a specific situation to be practically included in the development of a common position that can then be collectively implemented. As a leadership approach which emphasises the collective process whereby a system perspective is created from the inclusion and connection of individual perspectives, co-creative leadership allows the organisation as a whole to successfully adapt to its environment (Fig. 1). A crucial aspect is the inclusion of the affected members of the organisation and the preparation of a context being as hierarchy- and rank-free as possible, in order that the focus can be on working on problem-solving – as it indeed should be.

It is not about finding the single correct solution to a problem. Indeed, it is even assumed that this cannot be found at all since it does not exist. It is much more about delivering a solution that members of an organisation can

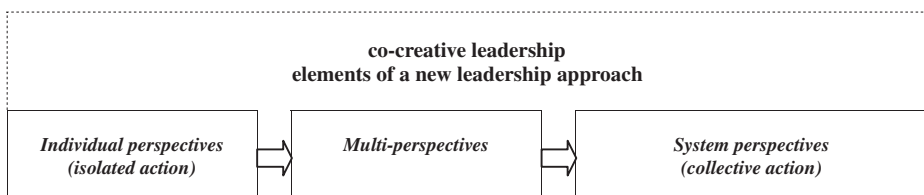


Fig. 1. Co-creative leadership

collectively agree upon, following a thorough examination of the various perspectives.

The co-creative leadership process introduced here enables an organisation to find its own solution and its members to find a common solution. This endogenous, collective solution ensures a broadening of the behaviour repertoire of the organisation as a whole, enabling it to develop common solutions and increase the likelihood of internal adaptation to the external environment. This concept of leadership underlines the close relationship between leadership and learning. The development of adaptability on the basis of varying perspectives within the organisation means, in essence, organisational learning and leads to the creation of an organisation that learns.

It is not about the harmonisation of all perspectives, putting all staff on the same level or the elimination of differences – from my point of view this is not only unattainable but also not desirable. It is much more about using the existing differences productively and the combining of various interests (and therefore channels of action). The differences that necessarily exist between the various organisational perspectives contain enormous power which is very often not used productively. On the contrary, it is usually counterproductive when the goals and interests of staff or departments of an organisation conflict. The efforts of organisation members are focussed on an internal “competition for resources” (for influence, funds, and staff, etc.). An organisation can rarely afford this internal conflict over the long term. Furthermore, the concentration of available resources on a common goal will become a crucial criterion for success in the future.

Co-creative leadership introduces a new understanding of leadership that stands in direct contradiction to conventional leadership approaches. Co-creative leadership is an approach that overcomes the above-mentioned difficulties and enables organisations to operate successfully – even in difficult, highly complex and dynamic environments. In the following, the article outlines this leadership approach in detail, touching upon its various levels.

The theoretical level: The theoretical foundations of co-creative leadership

Co-creative leadership draws largely on the following four theoretical approaches: systems theory, cybernetics, constructivism, and communications theory.

What is being led? The systems theory perspective

The question of a modern understanding of leadership begins with its objective: what is being led? It is about the leadership of organisations and individuals. As the author understands it, organisations and individuals are

systems, social and psychological systems at that. This leads to a systems theory perspective.¹

A system is a collection of elements which are bound to each other and through their specific relations to one another distinguish themselves in an environment. The maintaining of relations through internal operations continually reproduces and renews the boundaries with the environment and guarantees the survival of the system. A system can only survive in the long term when it is supported by the majority of its (individual) units (or to put it another way, when the individuals act together as a whole).

A system is closed and has boundaries. It defines itself (and its boundaries) through its differences to its environment; that is to say that on the one hand there is the corporation and on the other the market. The corporation seeks its own profile within this market – its distinction from all the other participants. The internal observation of this distinction (this is how we are and that is how the others are) gives rise to an identity which gives the system its intrinsic “purpose in life”. This identity also determines what can penetrate the system. A system lets in only those stimuli to which it can relate.

Successful leadership consists of the continual struggle with changes within and without an organisation, a continual organisational activity that assists the organisation to adapt to these changes in the most optimal way. By highlighting alternative courses of action, leadership also means maintaining capacity for action, despite changes inside and outside the organisation. However, alternative courses of action for the system as a whole can only be developed if all organisation members are aware of the identity of the system – that is, if it is clear to everyone how the organisation distinguishes, differentiates, and positions itself in its environment.

Leadership therefore has to be about repeatedly making the identity of the system comprehensible to the organisation members and constantly redeveloping a “suitable, common” solution within an on-going process. An “absolute and final” solution for a concrete situation is only valid as long as it can prove itself (or, as long as it suits the environment of the organisation, i.e., if it is suitable for the market). The solution must continually be tested for its suitability.

This perpetual search for a suitable solution makes it clear that systems function according to their own logic – indeed, they have to. Solution approaches have to be developed from the system; only then can real, enduring adaptation be achieved. If one forces a foreign solution upon a system, then this adjustment cannot take place.

We describe as a learning organisation one that both of its own vocation and through dealing with its specific environment constantly searches for suitable solutions. Successful learning requires reflection. On the basis of internal instances of reflection, a learning organisation succeeds in repeatedly

observing itself and its distinction from its environment. Through having another good look anew at this difference, the organisation creates its own identity. Such behaviour also enables the organisation to consider itself as a component of a larger system, to the “survival” of which it must contribute. Instances of reflection are necessary to help the organisation see itself in its environment. One possible form of reflection is dialogue, which will be explored further later.

Since I have mentioned why an organisation is to be understood as a system and the main characteristics of systems have been described, the question arises of how systems can be led. This leads to the theory of cybernetics.

How are systems led? The cybernetic perspective

As a theory of the control of systems, cybernetics² can be seen in close connection with systems theory. Cybernetics also regards the organisation as a system, which does not obey linear control mechanisms (Beer 1971). In an earlier form (first-order cybernetics), the theory perceived organisations almost as “trivial machines” which could be led by simple input–output rules. This first form of cybernetics was concerned exclusively with systems and their internal conditions and above all with feedback effects. The observations of events in the system quickly gave rise to terms such as control, power, and steering. As time went on, however, it was recognised that while a steering stimulus (i.e., a concrete leadership decision) can have the desired effect, this is not necessarily always the case since undesirable side effects are not always apparent to the “helmsman” (the leader) at the time the decision is taken.

This new understanding of a leader not as an external “driver” but as an internal component of the system was crucial. From this discovery was developed second-order cybernetics. It also recognised that the more complex the system, the greater the possibility of undesirable side effects (negative feedback loops). It is exactly these two characteristics – a high level of complexity and dynamics that are presently reality for most organisations, as it indeed is likely to be in the future. It is this that constitutes the difficulties of the prevailing classic understanding of leadership, which still views organisations as trivial machines that can be steered in a linear fashion.

A modern understanding of leadership has to overcome this linear perspective. The recognition that it is not only the individual system members (namely, the managers in a corporation) who determine the development of the system as a whole, but that it is influenced by every system member, and the knowledge of possible feedback effects that could hugely endanger the whole system, should prompt management personnel to reconsider their understanding of leadership. Recognising the difficulty of foreseeing its long-term effects puts the significance of a management decision firmly into perspective.

The original stimulus generates many other stimuli. The countless effects of these stimuli on the system as a whole cannot be comprehended by individuals. Its complexity cannot be conceived, finally proving one statement above all to be true: complex systems steer themselves; the leadership of systems means the self-leadership of the system.

This conclusion is perhaps formulated too drastically for a concrete organisational context but it does assist with the development of a new mode of leadership. Leadership is thus not only an individual phenomenon, coupled with the leadership capabilities of the management personnel but to a large extent also a social, collective phenomenon. While the individual part can be influenced by the management personnel, leadership takes place as a social, collective phenomenon which cannot easily be influenced by the manager. Managers have to live with this paradox. On the basis of the insights of cybernetics, leadership has to achieve, above all, the following: develop a context within which the system's high level of complexity can be dealt with in the best possible way. This can only happen if a large number of alternative options of action are available which, at all times, allow the system to adapt to changes flexibly.

How can members of a system be led? The constructivist perspective

A social system consists of individual system units (individuals, departments, etc.). From a leadership perspective, the question arises of what determines the activities of the system members, how they are influenced and consequently, how they can be led. This leads to the constructivist perspective.³

The constructivist perspective is based on the understanding that no system (therefore no individual, no organisational entity) has direct access to reality. Rather the reality is "filtered" through the cognitive structures available to the individual or organisational entity (Maturana 1996, Maturana and Varela 1984). Every system consequently "fabricates" its own personal view of the world based on its options of cognitive perception and then acts on the basis of these constructions. This view implies that a great many personal perceptions of reality (or rather, constructions) exist alongside each other.

If one follows the constructivist perspective and assumes that each of these views of reality has its own justification, then it becomes clear that no one individual (or group) can put their perspective forward as the one true valid one (Watzlawick 1973). No single perspective can thus lay claim to correctness or truth (since this would indeed mean that one individual [or group] has grasped reality and is right, while the others have "mistaken" reality and consequently are wrong) (von Foerster 1973).

Based on a systems theoretical understanding, an individual's or organisation's constructions of reality are neither true nor false, rather they are to

be classified, at best, as “suitable” or “capable of functioning” or alternatively, “unsuitable” or “incapable of functioning” (Bateson 2000). An image of reality is then suitable when it offers sufficient powers of explanation and problem-solving to make survival possible in the perception of reality it describes. For the organisation, this shows that it is not the individual (i.e., the CEO or the head of department) who has the one single valid perspective but that a (hopefully) suitable solution for the organisation as a whole arises, at best, out of a meaningful fusion of various different perspectives. A central element of a modern understanding of leadership therefore has to be respecting the various perspectives within an organisation, making them transparent and fusing them into a form that results in a common system perspective, which enables collective action.

How do members of a system interact within systems?

The communications theory perspective

A social system is made up of individuals who interact with one another. The system’s leadership can only be successful in creating a common system perspective from the differing perspectives if it understands how the individual members interact with one another, and how this interaction can be organised towards collective action. Interaction between individuals is based upon communication. This leads us to the communications theory perspective (Luhmann 1984), which is closely related with the constructivist perspective.

Communication is a determining element in every social system. Its significance in organisations is illustrated in the following statement by an American communications researcher: “Our organisational life is rooted in conversations – therefore we must treat conversation as a core business competence.” Thus, the way that communication is structured within an organisation is crucial. For example, it can either be discursive or dialogical. If one considers the other theoretical pillars of co-creative leadership (systems theory, cybernetics, constructivism), it becomes clear that, in this case, the only type of communication which makes sense is one that makes room for different perspectives to be assimilated on an equal basis. Dialogue provides the context for this type of communication. Not dialogue in its everyday sense, however, but dialogue as described by David Bohm (1996).

According to Bohm, the starting point of every dialogue is the putting into perspective of one’s own position. Rigidly holding on to one’s own perspective as the supposedly one true view can lead, at best, to a discussion, but never a dialogue. The constructivist view mentioned above almost automatically leads to the dialogue form of communication. For from the very moment the individuals acknowledge that their interpretation of reality cannot

Table 1. Core insights of co-creative leadership's theoretical perspectives

What is being led?	Systems theory
Organisations and individuals = systems (social and psychological systems)	Organisations and individuals are being led: these are living social systems. Filtering mechanism: system only takes in things that belong to the system = identity. Systems define their identity through differentiating themselves from their environment (e.g., the business from the market); instances of reflection are needed to make this differentiation. Purpose of the system = survival in its environment (i.e., survival for the business = success). <i>Lesson for leadership:</i> formulation of an identity as a basis for common action by all system members (and necessary prerequisite for survival in a complex and dynamic environment); identity needs instances of reflection.
How can systems be led?	Cybernetics
Steering the system	Cybernetics = theory of the steering of systems. Builds upon systems theory: systems are not trivial machines (cybernetics I) but complex and ambiguous to steer (undesirable feedback loops). This leads to cybernetics II: systems steer themselves (influence of the individual system members is difficult to classify). <i>Lesson for leadership:</i> Linear input–output thinking is overcome, alternative solutions are identified and made visible, broadening of the spectrum of action for whole organisation, comprehension of leadership as an individual and social phenomenon.
How can members of a system be led?	Constructivism
Upon what basis do the system members act?	Central statement: no system ever has direct access to reality, only indirect access. Consequently, each system “fabricates” its reality on the basis of its own cognitive structures (experiences, socialisation, fears, desires). <i>Lesson for leadership:</i> No one is in possession of the one single truth – respect the perspectives and alternative problem-solving approaches of others.
How do members interact within systems?	Communications theory
How does collective action by individuals and organisation entities arise?	Interaction in social systems succeeds through communication; consequently they are also led by communication. Communication is therefore the key to collective action; however, there is no unambiguous form of communication. Communication is mostly incorrectly understood,

Table 1. (Contd.)

if at all, since the listener, not the speaker, decides the meaning of a statement (Heinz von Foerster); herein lies the great danger of misunderstandings and diverging perspectives which make collective action impossible.

Lesson for leadership: Organise communication so that the perspectives of all system members are included; the organisation's options for action will consequently become transparent and a basis for collective action created; the creation of the correct communicative context (dialogue).

of course be a universally accepted truth but merely represents personal points of view, communication can no longer be understood as verbal portrayal of one's own position. Rather, communication has to draw in the perspectives of others, in order to access and experience through them other glimpses of reality, and consequently, other possible forms of behaviour and adaptation.

Dialogue alone creates a communicative context within which the various perspectives can be explicitly and communicatively presented and compared and contrasted as alternative versions of reality. In the context of dialogue, the individual can examine other perspectives and see himself in relation to them. And when this level of reflection is reached within dialogue, it becomes possible to reconsider one's own perspective. A modern form of leadership must therefore succeed in creating a context for dialogue as the form of communication. Co-creative leadership makes this possible. The approach synthesises the fundamental findings of the theoretical perspectives outlined above and connects them in a new leadership framework. This is summarised in Table 1.

The lessons that can be drawn from the schools of thought portrayed here form the basis for co-creative leadership as a modern, redefining understanding of leadership: We understand leadership as the continuous formation of creative and communicative contexts that facilitate a cooperative process for developing solutions for the organisation as a whole. We call this understanding of leadership co-creative leadership. On the basis of this definition, the actual leadership process that lies behind co-creative leadership will be outlined in the following section.

The process level: the co-creative leadership process

The starting point of every leadership situation is always a concrete situation perceived to be problematic or challenging. Possible examples of such situ-

ations are, e.g., the development of a new organisational or departmental strategy, the introduction of new leadership guidelines or mission statements, the integration of a new subsidiary, or the coordination between two departments.

Individual perspectives (isolated action): recognising what impedes action

The first step must always be to make clear how the various perspectives within organisations are formed. A difficulty that many organisations face with this is that the individual members of the organisation are not aware of the different perspectives (images and interpretations of reality). In many cases, it is assumed that one shares a common position. However, frequently the different perspectives are made into issues. It then becomes a question of differing notions, e.g., the optimum characteristics for a particular product, the right product portfolio, or the correct investment strategy.

Behind all these different notions there often lie huge internal conflicts and power struggles. Making the individual- or department-specific perspectives apparent is also about uncovering these conflicts and the identification of inconsistencies, resistances, and obstacles. These are exactly the phenomena that ultimately cost many organisations a large amount of time (and often money too). Astonishingly, it is very often not technical matters that demand the most time and energy in an organisation but conflicts and disputes which exist between the individual entities of the organisation. Indeed, at first glance the problem often seems to be a technical one and solutions are correspondingly sought on the technical level or on the formal process and structural level. For example, it is said that, “the processes and structures have to be optimised” or “we need a technical expert who can solve the problem” or “marketing is working with the wrong concepts”.

These proposed solutions emanate from those perspectives that one accepts within the organisation, other perspectives being largely excluded. And so it is in the nature of the matter that it is barely possible to find a common solution.

It is important to note that it is not a desire for harmony or constant agreement that underlies co-creative leadership. On the contrary, differences are recognised as being something positive, since within them lies the potential for change. It is about preventing the forces of change within an organisation from neutralising each other simply because they operate in opposite directions. Mostly, this happens subconsciously. Superficially, there is an apparent understanding of the direction in which the organisation should develop. Underneath the surface, however, there lie contradictory interpretations of this common direction, resulting in opposing, often mutually neutralising actions. This hampers the whole organisation’s capacity for action.

**Multiple perspectives (the creation of a space for possibilities):
identification of the available options for action**

In the next step the various perspectives will be brought together in a common “perspectives space”. Through the inclusion of the various perspectives, this step is about providing all participants with a complete and improved understanding of the respective problem situations. Crucial to this is the common basic understanding that the one single correct perspective does not exist but that the various perspectives each portray valid extracts of a shared reality. This is how a space for possibilities is formed within which different problem-solving approaches coexist on equal footing.

**System perspective (collective action): increased capacity for action
on the basis of a common perspective**

From the greater understanding of the individual perspectives generated within the space for possibilities, the participants now develop a system perspective that allows the organisation to concentrate its energies in one direction.

The aspects of participation and inclusion are of decisive significance. It is difficult for someone who has taken part in the development of a solution to elude its implementation – because he has understood it for one thing, but also because of the personal duty and responsibility resulting from this process. A member of an organisation simply cannot allow himself to belatedly blockade a collectively developed solution without losing credibility. The system perspective forms the foundations for the collective preparation of an action plan which all participants are obliged to implement. In this step of the process, the organisation develops a great capacity for collective action.

**Initiation (system stimulation): successful long-term survival through
constant invigoration of the leadership cycle**

As soon as a system perspective has been conceptualised and on the basis of that, an action plan negotiated, the organisation has attained a great capacity for collective action vis-à-vis the particular problem situation. It can now operate as a whole, in a focussed manner. However, it is inevitable that this common perspective will disintegrate into individual perspectives once again. This is because systems are continually developing further. The original situation changes and these changes are interpreted in different ways by those they concern. Dysfunctionalities then arise in the organisation which again lead to contradictory actions and consequently to new conflicts and misunderstandings.

It should be aimed to identify, as soon as possible, when the common perspective developed in the previous step ceases to be the optimum fit for the new situation. As soon as this time approaches, it is important to reinvigorate the leadership cycle (to stimulate it) and direct the forces of change concealed within the growing differences towards the formulation and implementation of a new common solution.

In this case, stimulation means to make known and to make an issue of the existing imbalance (or that which is becoming apparent) thereby disturbing the apparently existing equilibrium – that is to practically generate instability deliberately. Stimulation means the “constructive provocation” of the forces for change contained within the differences, in order to activate them to make necessary changes within the whole organisation.

In a more dramatic form, stimulation can also mean a crisis – a situation in which the organisation has already reached a high level of instability. In order to activate a willingness to change, there are even theories that advise management personnel to generate so-called artificial crises in certain situations where the organisation’s need to make fundamental changes is not shared by most of its members.

Solutions’ ceasing to fit is an inherent element of all living systems which is continually cropping up. That which a company calls a solution, a process, or structure are ultimately all attempts by the organisation to adapt to its environment (market, competition, and technology, etc.) in the optimum way. If these parameters change, the current adaptation mechanisms cease to function. If one internalises this understanding, changes become much less threatening. Rather, it heightens one’s awareness of the continual need to maintain the organisation’s viability through the leadership cycle described above, thereby optimising the organisation’s capacity for action.

This is how the co-creative leadership process would be described conceptually. It is summarised in Fig. 2. The next section explains its practical implementation.

The action level: dialogue and semantic mapping as central instruments of leadership

How can co-creative leadership be implemented in practice? There are two main instruments which help to organise the leadership process effectively: dialogue and semantic mapping. These are briefly introduced in the following.

Dialogue

By dialogue we understand a specific context for communication on an equal footing, defined by rules. Dialogue is the suitable form of communication for allowing various perspectives to speak alongside each other (not against each

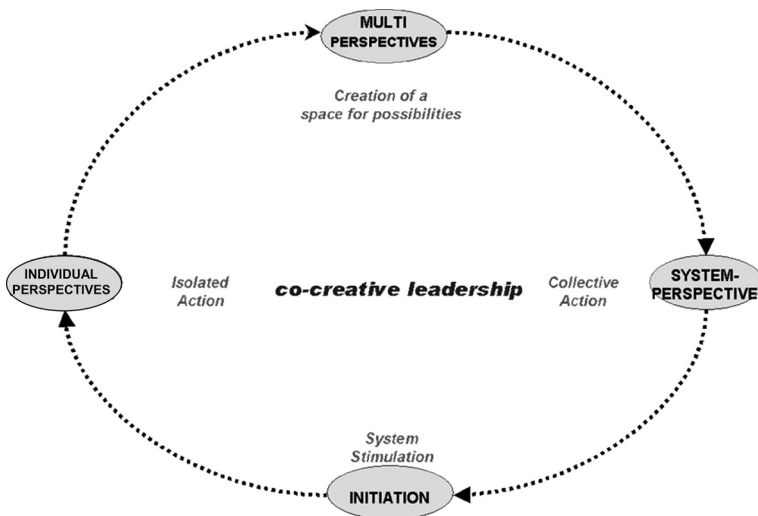


Fig. 2. Overview on co-creative leadership

other). It overcomes discussion as the prevailing form of conversation within organisations, which hardens individual perspectives and hinders the development of a system perspective. Comprehensive literature already exists on dialogue and its practical organisation. Various practices have also already been successfully tested within organisations (Hartkemeyer et al. 2001, Isaacs 1999).

An especially effective form of dialogue organisation is the World Café (Brown et al. 2005). The World Café aims to demonstrate a practical and creative way of promoting the capacity for collective thinking through a particular form of conversation. Through its specific form of leading a conversation structured with simple rules, a highly interactive form of dialogue can be formed within a short time. It includes every participant, each with her or his own experiences, and makes it possible to learn about a broad variety of thought and solution approaches in a short space of time. Thus in a simple way, the World Café promotes the sharing of different perspectives and knowledge and demonstrates new options of action. The World Café is an effective approach which is broadly applicable to business, politics, and education – ultimately to all organisations.

Many managers view the inclusion of numerous perspectives as being dangerous since it greatly increases the complexity of the system. To be sure, the dialogue situation produces a high level of complexity in the short term. However, the analysis of differing constructions of reality on an equal basis ultimately leads to the identification of a greater number of potential solutions and creates the preconditions for a common perspective. It can be argued that the complexity of the dialogue situation is converted from being

a somewhat destructive force which prevails in the area of conflicting individual perspectives to a constructive complexity that can eventually emerge as a system perspective, itself perceived to be less complex. It is a crucial point that the differences existing between the individual organisation members naturally cannot be solved in single successful dialogue situation. This is not what it is about. These differences will certainly be overcome in the short term, resulting in a capacity for action. Nevertheless, they remain in the background and return to the fore as soon as the system comes across its first difficulties with adaptation. These differences then lead to disintegration but they also contain the energy to carry out the necessary adaptation anew. It is exactly at this point that further initiation through co-creative leadership is needed.

Semantic mapping

Semantic mapping (Schieffer and Rodriguez 2003) is a novel and innovative leadership instrument that assists in analysing and raising awareness and visibility of the various individual perspectives, on the basis of the terms used to describe them. Semantic mapping clarifies and makes graphically visible the difference between the individual perspectives. It allows the organisation members to identify and resolve the contradictions and paradoxes hidden within this difference. If dialogue creates the possibility of recognising other perspectives and reflecting upon one's own, then semantic mapping is the instrument for making them visible, understanding the semantics behind them, and consequently developing new perspectives. Out of individually conceptualised maps emerges a common map on the basis of which all organisation members can make themselves understood.

A legitimate criticism of dialogue is that it is not goal-oriented enough and difficult to apply in a practical organisational context. Semantic mapping overcomes this difficulty by making dialogue practicable for concrete leadership situations. In the leadership context of co-creative leadership, dialogue and semantic mapping are closely linked. This results in completely new possibilities for developing a common perspective within an organisation and consequently in a greater capacity for common action.

The individual level: role of the manager in the co-creative leadership context

What does co-creative leadership mean for the individual manager? We have already noted that we no longer see leadership as being confined to the organisation's elite but understand it as a collective process, above all. Hence leadership is first and foremost a collective phenomenon which individuals have a limited ability to shape, their role being confined to that of an initiator

and participant in a collective leadership process. There will always have to be someone to initiate the leadership process and create the climate for leadership to successfully take place. In this sense, leadership is also a personal phenomenon which is dependent on the personal leadership qualities of the manager.

At this point it makes sense to differentiate (once again) between the terms “leadership” and “management”. Management is about the techniques necessary for the organisation to effectively organise its structure and internal routines and processes. To cope with management tasks, technical knowledge is required to act as effectively as possible within the structures and processes of an organisation. These techniques can be learnt and thus one can become a good sales manager, finance manager, or product manager.

It makes sense that the less experienced product manager is technically subordinate to the more experienced one; it also makes sense that the latter has a greater amount of responsibility for the process as a whole than the former. Since there are reliable, functioning processes and procedural techniques, dialogue is of no significance here. Technical debates at this level can be thoroughly discursive and take place on the basis of technical arguments.

Co-creative leadership is therefore not about the abolition of technically hierarchical relationships within an organisation or the cancelling out of all differences through the dialogue technique. On the level of structures and processes, it is important that the individual organisation members adapt so that the organisation can operate efficiently. But only for as long as the existing structures and processes fit and therefore actually support the organisation’s capacity for action. Leadership in this sense is always in demand when a problem situation cannot be solved with management techniques alone. This is the case when a problem is not of a clear nature but is ambiguous. Here, leadership is sought to make the existing knowledge lying behind the diverging perspectives effective once again for the whole organisation.

Conclusion

In summary, we can say the following why co-creative leadership is of central significance for modern organisations.

Co-creative leadership can be applied universally. It concerns a leadership approach that is relevant to all organisational leadership situations and enables all organisations to develop collectively formulated visions, strategies, processes, structures, and operational guidelines.

Co-creative leadership respects and makes transparent diverging perspectives in businesses and shows how forces for change lying behind these differences can be used creatively.

Supported by modern leadership methods (dialogue, World Café, and semantic mapping, etc.), co-creative leadership allows for the initiation of continual solution-finding processes and the decisive strengthening and maintenance of the capacity for action and success of the organisation as a whole.

On the basis of co-creative leadership, organisations can develop a shared identity that serves as a guide for action and allows for the focussed action of the whole organisation.

Even if it is individual organisations (i.e., the private commercial organisation) that are in the foreground of this article’s analysis, this approach does have an undeniable relevance for other entities such as organisational networks, network organisations, or international governmental organisations. The looser the connections between the individual units, the more likely it is that the traditional, hierarchical leadership fails and coordination and leadership mechanisms are required which include the various perspectives on an equal basis. Thus an action dynamic develops that allows the whole association (organisational network, community of states) to work together effectively (Fig. 3 is summarising the central aspects of co-creative leadership).

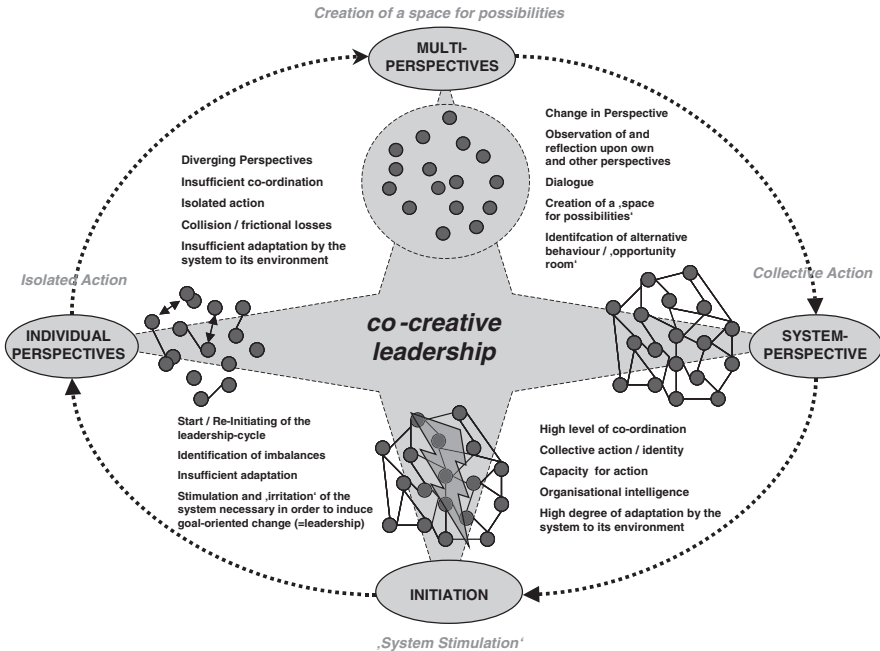


Fig. 3. Essential aspects of co-creative leadership

Notes

1 Main representatives of the systems perspective: Niklas Luhmann, Humberto Maturana (autopoiesis), Peter Senge.

2 Main representatives of the cybernetic perspective: Stafford Beer, Jay Forrester, Norbert Wiener.

3 Main representatives of the constructivist perspective: Gregory Bateson, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Heinz von Förster, Paul Watzlawik.

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