The Integral Dialectic: Meeting Complexity through Transforming Leadership Practices and Paradigms in Adult Education

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Abstract: This multiple-case study examined a process of adult learning in which two groups of health care leaders experienced shifts in consciousness and behaviors through an embodied experience of an integral dialectic, which resulted in more effective leadership ways-of-being, greater leadership impact, and enhanced personal satisfaction and engagement.

Key Words: transformative learning and education, appreciative inquiry, leadership development, integral leadership, integral consciousness, way-of-being

In order to meet the challenges we face as a world community and as a nation, we need a more expansive leadership paradigm that has the capacity to keep pace with the complexities inherent in a rapidly changing, global world (McIntosh, 2007). In order to live into this new paradigm, we must provide learning opportunities that will assist in the transformation of consciousness and way-of-being in our leaders.

A Program Grounded in Integral, Appreciative, and Transformation Theories

The purpose of this paper is to explore how a leadership development program grounded in integral, appreciative and transformation theories addressed these goals through the process of creating an embodied integral dialectic. I designed and delivered a leadership development program that represented a synthesis of theories and practices from these fields, delivered it to two groups of health care leaders, and then studied its effectiveness.

In conceptualizing my use of transformation theory, I am guided by the rubric proposed by Fisher-Yoshida, Geller & Shapiro (2009). I used three of the orientations they identify — cognitive rational, depth psychology and structural development. From the cognitive rational approach, I used critical reflection, disorienting dilemmas, perspective transformation, and communicative and emancipatory learning (Mezirow 1991). Expanding their discussion of the cognitive rational approach, I also included multiple ways-of-knowing and whole-person learning (Yorks & Kasl, 2002) as well as the vision of a leader's way-of-being (Stoneham, Weger & Rocco, 2006). From the depth psychology approach, I utilized practices that helped participants access the archetypal and symbolic aspect of their leadership aspirations as well as a better understanding of the interplay in their inner and outer worlds (Boyd & Myers, 1988). The structural development approach guides the applied practice of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999) as well as my use of peer coaching and individually tailored integral coaching sessions (Flaherty, 1999).

My program design is dialectical at multiple levels. First, within the discourse of transformative learning, I synthesized the best of what each approach offers. Second, after synthesizing what I believed were the most potent applications from Transformative Learning,

Appreciative Inquiry and Integral Coaching, I applied them to leadership development to create what Ken Gergen (1999) calls a new hybrid form of "Social Constructivism." In this paper I explore the impact of this hybrid, which I frame as a dialectic synthesis of Integral Coaching's constructivism and Appreciative Inquiry's social constructionism.

The program had three phases—the initial workshops, follow-up coaching, and learning debriefs. The first phase, the Appreciative Leadership workshop, occurred over a two-day period. The workshop was heavily grounded in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) practice, to provide participants with experiences that would support them in building the capacity to be an appreciative leader. Secondly, the workshop provided the opportunity to begin the development of an individual coaching plan that addressed personal leadership aspirations.

Phase Two consisted of individual Executive Integral Coaching with each participant and included three to five thirty minute monthly telephone sessions following the workshop. Participants were coached on the topics they chose related to their personal development plan. In each coaching session, I provided participants with individually tailored learning activities which included self-observations, reflective practices, appreciative inquiry practices, readings and self-care practices to be completed between coaching sessions. Phase Three consisted of a series of learning debriefs spread strategically during and post program completion.

Methods

My research was a qualitative, multiple-case study comprised of ten health care leaders aggregated into two groups. The first group, the public workshop, included fourteen leaders from across the country; I selected five participants for the research. The second group of five participants, who participated in a similar workshop, was selected from a group of twenty-two marketing leaders from an intact leadership team from a 14,000 employee health care organization in Southern California. My research evaluated participants' changes in consciousness and behaviors that occurred as a result of their participation in the program. Second, it evaluated the specific issues that made the program an effective tool for leadership transformation in adult learners.

Multiple data sources included artifacts collected at the workshops (facilitator notes, photographs of group flip charts and leadership mandalas, photos of group presentations, workshop evaluation surveys), data collected during the coaching process (personal coaching plans, notes from coaching sessions) and debrief notes (program debrief interviews and semi-structured interview transcripts).

Five Emergent Themes Describe Program Effectiveness

Five themes describe program characteristics that participants reported as most important for facilitating their growth and change.

Combination of Workshop and Coaching

Study participants frequently mentioned the importance of linkages across the various learning modalities and the way the design created accountability to apply what was learned to life and work following the workshop.

> I think the workshop was a catalyst, but it would have been like a fire that went out due to lack of oxygen without the coaching sessions. They added an element of accountability…. I chose to participate in [coaching conversations], so I was

going to the do the work that needed to be done to make those sessions valuable.

Program Duration and Experiential Qualities

Program duration helped anchor and ground learning with a highly experiential design that extended for four to six months. Overall sentiment was that the program length was adequate to help participants embody their new learning, though several suggested adding another day of content to the workshop in order to gain more practical experience in using Appreciative Inquiry. Some would have preferred additional coaching sessions.

Appreciative Stance

I was interested in how a process designed for groups might be applied to developing individual leaders, so I constructed a model of individual development loosely based on the "4-D" model from Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperidder & Whitney, 2000). This model and the model I created subsequent to my research are included in research documentation (Stoneham, 2009). In using this approach, the third theme that emerged was that all program activities maintained a consistent focus on taking an appreciative stance and utilizing inquiry in work and life, which participants attributed to enhancing both leadership effectiveness and satisfaction and engagement. They also noted improvements in relationships with loved ones, in learning to be less self-critical and in celebrating what they and others were doing well.

> I have held onto the appreciative inquiry approach of starting off with the acknowledgement, the recognition, of building off the positive.

Another participant reported about how applying what she had learned in the workshop about AI had allowed her to stimulate "inquiry, dialogue and reflection" on a leadership development initiative she was leading in her workplace.

> Various people on the committee talked about how it was unlike any other committee they had been on. It was different because participation was so high and the people were able to say the hard things and share with one another and inquire about what will work, what won't work, should we go ahead, should we not? I don't think anybody on that committee was used to doing that.

Reflective Practices

The fourth major theme was how the integration of reflective practices helped facilitate participant's growth and change. Various individually tailored reflective practices were woven throughout the program including contemplative practices, meditation, journaling, somatic practices, deep listening, and self-observations and questioning assumptions. These practices were designed as a means of enhancing conscious awareness of the impact of behaviors, to build new habits and skills and to create greater presence and resilience.

One participant's reflective practice consisted of reading sacred texts each morning with her spouse, meditating each day and focusing on slowing down and being more present to the sacredness in everyday life. She noted how this awareness had helped her "stop to reflect on the words and questions I'm going to use before a meeting" as well as being "less reactive" and better able to "appreciate both sides of an issue."

The most important thing I learned from the program is to stop and smell the roses and take time to regenerate and renew myself, at work, at home, everywhere.

Follow-up Coaching

The fifth theme was that the follow-up coaching was the most valuable part of the program because it helped make the learning practical and sustainable. One participant summarized the value of the coaching experience for her development as a leader.

This program is the best I've ever attended. The coaching was terrific and gave us a lot of neat tips to enhance the relationship with our staff and my tasks. It's helping not only me but also the marketing organization. You kept it focused and related to the original goal from the workshop. [The coaching] was very valuable and was something we'd never done before. It creates more productive time even though it takes time to do. It makes us more relaxed and effective…

Specific Aspects of the Workshop and Coaching that Fostered Learning

Additionally, participants noted specific aspects of the workshop and the coaching fostered learning. With respect to the workshop, they reported that learning was fostered through the variety of tools and experiences that were offered and the holistic and provocative content that was utilized. They also indicated they appreciated the positive focus of the workshop and the practical application of AI, the engaging pace and flow of the material and how the facilitators created a safe and supportive environment in which to do the work.

Specific aspects of the follow-up coaching that fostered learning included the coach's presence or way-of-being, which helped create and build a trusting relationship in which effective coaching could take place. These included the coach demonstrating the following qualities in her way-of-being: unconditional acceptance, approachability and non-defensiveness, exhibiting genuine caring, creating a safe environment, honoring people as unique individuals, and providing feedback in a non-threatening way. Participants also noted important aspects of the coach's technical competence, or way-of-doing that helped foster learning. These included making quick and accurate assessments, providing practical feedback, skillful use of inquiry, offering powerful distinctions that helped expand perspectives, providing effective activities between coaching sessions and creating accountability mechanisms.

Conclusions

What I came to understand through my research is that in order to achieve a paradigmatic shift in leadership, a paradigmatic shift in personal epistemology is first required. We cannot expect changes in *how* the work of leadership is conducted until we change our way-of-being as leaders. Way-of-being then becomes the grounding point for how we *do* the work of leadership. It informs the way we relate to ourselves, to others and to the world in fundamentally different ways.

With that in mind, my research generated five key conclusions about leadership way-of-being and the program structures that helped create it. First, my research revealed that as a leader, one's way-of-being is most effective when it is integral and holistic. Offering integral and holistic practices and observations shifts the focus of leadership from being a cognitive exercise to a more integrally embodied experience. For example, one of

the participants who also taught leadership development at the college level noted how a holistic approach to development helped him shift his leadership from being an intellectual exercise to an embodied experience.

> I learned I could work more actively in really being a better leader. It's something I intellectually know, but I think it hadn't really sunk in for me in terms of looking at my own behavior. It was easy to keep it at an intellectual distance before. It's easy to ask your students to keep a journal without having to do it yourself.

The second major conclusion I drew from my findings is that leadership way-of-being is most powerful when it focuses on strengths, when it is appreciative, authentic and generative. One of the primary tasks of integral leaders is not just discovering what is working well and building from strengths, but also seizing problems and casting them into opportunities. When an appreciative lens is embodied in a leaders' way of being, it increases possibilities for action and becomes a prism through which a new way of knowing and interacting with self and others is reflected in her world.

> I think my leadership is enhanced because I'm not so quick to judge. I'm more appreciative of what the circumstances are. Using positive questions has really helped. I would say I am a much better leader in terms of realizing that there is so much diversity in situations. Now, I always try to get both sides of the story and I don't know that I did that before, to figure out what the proper course of action might be. When you have two sides of a story, it's a lot easier to do that.

One of the greatest surprises from my research was my discovery that appreciative capacities are subsumed in an integral way-of-being when my initial premise was that developing appreciative leaders should take precedence over developing integral leaders. I now believe that although an integral way-of-being and an appreciative way-of-being are inextricably bound together, that the former is more inclusive.

My third conclusion from my research is that an effective way-of-being as a leader evolves through the respectful and nurturing interplay of relationships with self, with others and with the transcendent. Ken Gergen's hybrid epistemology of "social constructivism" advocates that the way we make meaning of the world occurs largely through the "categories supplied by social relationships" (1999, p. 237). I would expand that to include how we make meaning through our relationship to self and to the transcendent, which I identify as what one holds most sacred as individually defined. When we support leaders in developing more meaningful and trusting relationships with self, with others and with their connection to something greater than themselves, their effectiveness and engagement is significantly enhanced.

> My relationship with my boss has greatly improved. We used to have conversations that were exasperating. I have been able to be pretty honest with him after some very negative meetings. I was able to talk to him about my vision for what I thought we should do differently…I don't know if here was a change on his part of a new sense of who I am or my contributions, but he's become a lot calmer around me and a lot more thoughtful.

My research also revealed that the program structures that supported these shifts in leadership way-of-being were that the intervention design was developmental, it provided mechanisms for personal accountability, and it anchored learning over time. Second, by studying the differences between the public workshop group and the intact team, my research demonstrated that learning was more likely to be integrated and acculturated through shared support in a long-term learning group who shared a common vested interest.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Currently, many leadership development programs in higher education and in organizations continue to focus on what I call way-of-doing, or on developing the functional skills of leadership. Although important, these skills are not enough. As adult educators, we need to be supporting leaders to develop the capacities to expand consciousness and develop more effective ways-of-being as well as ways-of-doing in order to keep pace with the ever-increasing complexities in our world. We need to engage leaders in an integral dialectic by teaching them to perceive and interact with the world in ways that transcend and include the best of the past and apply it to the present, while remaining open to all the possibilities that a more expansive worldview provides.

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