

Discourse-Based Generative Leadership in Organizations

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keyword

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Introduction

Nowadays, the launch of a company's new product might have an impact on the sustainable development of certain areas on the other side of the earth. Decision-making at the headquarters of a multinational company can cause anxiety, expectations, and/or other feelings among people worldwide, and some recursive impacts back onto the company may follow-through¹ (Clark and Geppert, 2011; Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2011; Whittle et al., 2016). Currently, we are in that stage of our organizational and social life where we pattern the global and complex flow of our activities (Shaw, 2002).

Business leaders are now facing two major challenges. One challenge is the result of the question—where does leadership thrive in the era of volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) organizational life. The other challenge is an increasing demand for leading change and innovation in global and multicultural settings. In this regard, the present article is an inquiry into the guiding principles and brings forward eye-opening findings that can be beneficial to global leaders in a VUCA world.

The author contends that the preferred narrative from “taking actions to solve problems” to “inquiry-based learning-by-doing approach to challenges with no single answer” dominates among global business leaders (Marshak, 1998). One of the consequences of the prevailing narrative is the lack of theoretical and practical understanding of a discourse-based generative mindset that invites diverse discourses and ideas in real organizations and leads the processes to create innovative solutions.

The author's inquiry is structured as follows. First, a brief overview is provided on the increasing demand for leading challenges without any single correct answer that most business leaders are facing in a global and complex world. Organization development (OD), having its origin in the mindset of engagement and inquiry, has some implications for global leaders to figure out what the change should be rather than how to implement pre-ordained solutions. The discussion proceeds to delineate three guiding principles using which generative leaders can be advocates with global stakeholders of both processes and intended outcomes (Bushe and

Marshak, 2018). Furthermore, the author grounds this by showing some examples of global organizations that have enlightened the natures of successful adaptive change processes.

Increasing Demand for Leading Adaptive Challenges

Let us now begin with an inquiry into emerging challenges that confront today’s global leaders. Heifetz’s (1998) distinction between “technical problems” and “adaptive challenges” is a good starting point to look into the issue. Bush and Nagaishi (2018) illustrate the distinction between the two issues (Table 1). Business leaders are facing “technical problems,” which can be dealt with the top-down management by applying analytical models and expertise. However, as a result of increasing global competitive pressures, the business challenges involve the nature of “adaptive challenges”—in the sense that any adaptation does not lead to closure and creates new problems that will have to be adapted to (Thatchenkery and Upadhyaya, 1996). There is no right answer in a multicultural and complex world; global leaders are sailing in a rough sea without any navigation system and exposed to the threats that can evoke anxiety during the whole journey (Marshak, 2016).

Table 1: Differences between Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS	ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES
Easy to operationally define.	Difficult to agree on what the “problem” is.
Lend themselves to operational (process and procedures) solutions.	Require changes in values, beliefs, relationships, and mindsets.
People are generally receptive to technical solutions they understand.	People generally resist adopting other-defined values and beliefs.
Often can be solved by authorities or experts.	The stakeholders have to be involved in solving it.
Requires change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries.	Requires change in numerous places; usually across organizational boundaries.
Solutions can often be implemented relatively quickly by changing rules or work processes.	Adaptation requires experiments and discoveries as well as wrong turns and dead ends.
Technical problems stay solved until something else changes.	Adaptation creates new problems that will have to be adapted to.
Examples from Healthcare	
How do we ensure nurses know the safest methods for lifting patients?	How do we improve the health and wellness of nurses?
How do we ensure accurate information is provided during handoffs between care providers?	How do we increase collaboration among care providers?
How do we reduce errors in medications delivered to patients?	How do we get patients to take more responsibility for taking their meds?

Source: Bushe and Nagaishi (2018).

As Heifetz (1998) pointed out, one of the greatest failures of leadership is to consider adaptive challenges as similar to technical problems and apply the same approaches to the two issues. For leaders facing adaptive challenges in a VUCA world, trying to find the correct answer is “a losing proposition” (Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018, p. 27). Instead, a generative approach to OD has a different narrative of leadership; it emphasizes the importance of leading emergent change, mobilizing stakeholders in inquiries that will lead to answers that stakeholders will own and implement (Bushe, 2019a; 2019b). We are in a highly multicultural and complex era with an

urgent need to understand the concept of leadership based on the discourse-based generative mindset and values to enhance the adaptive capability of organizations (Nagaishi, 2020).

Bushe and Nagaishi (2018) argue that, during the 1970s, OD might find itself in the position of having others define the change and then being asked for advice on how to implement it, how to facilitate it, and how to manage it. This leads to a natural consequence that business leaders tend to see OD as something about implementation (the journey) but not about what to change (the destination). Many leaders, who sell themselves as purveyors of simple answers and quick results, could and would say, “I like this implementation plan about change. Please do that.” From the viewpoint of practicing OD, this kind of order inevitably brings about a dilemma. Having its origin in the mindset of engagement and inquiry, OD does not suit the situation in which the leader strategizes and determines the change and then hires someone to implement that decision.

However, to re-imagine OD, it is important to note that OD did not set about that way. As Schein (2015) and Bushe and Nagaishi (2018) recently recalled, OD was symbolized by a “spirit of inquiry” in its early days. It must be noted that the pioneers believed that engaging stakeholders in inquiry, framed by democratic values, authenticity, and informed decision-making, would result in better human relations, teams, and organizations (Argyris, 1970; Beckhard, 1969; Bennis, 1969; Schein, 1969). Based on this historical perspective, the Dialogic OD² is an approach to reinvigorate the discourse-based generative inquiry into collaborative decision-making regarding what to change and how to change (Bushe and Marshak, 2016; Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018). Business leaders with the dialogic and generative mindset can, even in the face of turbulent and uncertain globalization, manage the process “that is aimed at some improvement in the future functioning of the client system, rather than simply at getting the immediate task completed satisfactorily” (Steele, 1975: p. 3).

Given that the discourse-based generative leadership is uniquely qualified for tackling adaptive challenges in a VUCA world, let us move to examine what kind of guiding principles generative leaders should embrace during turbulent globalization. Principles always frame our actions and decisions and help us to connect to the complex world.

Guiding Principles for Generative Leadership

Generative principles guide leaders on how to translate their values (Bushe and Marshak, 2018; Cheng-Judge, 2018) and mindset (Bushe and Marshak, 2016; Nagaishi, 2020) into actualized leadership practices. It would be exciting to imagine business leaders working with generative principles that advocates with globally diverse stakeholders of both means (the journey) and ends (the destination). The author would like to exemplify three guiding principles and some associated underlying mindset for generative leaders: “promoting engagement and inquiry,” “being deeply interested in development,” and “creating containers with multiple discourses.” The principles listed here are not formulas for creating globally competitive organizations. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it intends to invite further conversations on how to delineate a generative image of leadership at a time when the business world is getting more global and complex.

1) *Generative leaders promote "engagement and inquiry"*

The more VUCA and global an issue is, the more complex is the relationship between stakeholders and the more “engagement and inquiry” is necessary by the stakeholders in a process of continuous improvement. Today’s global business environments are so interconnected and interdependent that “the resultant complexity makes it less easy for charismatic, ‘heroic’, leaders to individually dictate and control what has to happen” (Rowland and Higgs, 2008: p. 4). Given that, the author believes that the most essential element for leaders in creating great organizations is to facilitate “engagement and inquiry” by stakeholders in a process of improvement. Generative leaders manage a change process that engages stakeholders in defining the changes they will ultimately implement. This can be one of the qualities that differentiate leaders who deeply comprehend the original spirit of OD from others engaging in change management. The author believes that leadership works when the generative processes lead to the intended outcomes (Bushe, 2013).

In this regard, one of the crucial roles of generative leaders is to explain the genuine value of engagement and inquiry to all the stakeholders. They are necessary inputs for both the processes and the intended outcomes in all the processes. The key question now arises: in a global setting, it must always be a real problem about how widely one can invite stakeholders from almost all over the world. The author admits that it depends on how realistic it is, but the only plausible thing is to try to invite whoever might have a stake and who might be deeply interested in an inquired subject.

2) *Generative leaders are deeply interested in the "development" of organizations and individuals*

In a complex and sharp competitive business environment, one of the most lacking qualities of today’s leaders is a focus on the long-term “development” of people (and organizations). However, from the stakeholders’ viewpoint, it is a sense of “development” to seek when they engage projects in their organizational life (Hoffman, Casnocha, and Yeh, 2014). A complex world may not secure easy short-term outcomes in the process of emergent and adaptive challenges. One that distinguishes OD from other methods of organizational improvement is its deep concern with various aspects of “development” (Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018). Long-term balance in human affairs and social justice are, from the development point of view, always more prioritized than short-term effectiveness in OD’s calculus of great organizations. Generative leadership, in line with the OD’s spirit of inquiry, is in pursuit of those values in the development models that emphasize increasing capacity and desire for integrity, authenticity, and congruence at later stages on the developmental path toward the individual, team, or organizational “greatness” to adapt never-ending challenges around the globe (Bushe and Marshak, 2018).

After the 1970s, the concept of “OD is about change” emerged, and the economic criteria began to prevail. Development was replaced by “economic effectiveness”, and this devaluation of development orientation created value dilemmas in the process of OD practices. Most OD practitioners should look at people’s (and the organization’s) development and allow a team to experience the stages of disruption and ineffectiveness. However, from the perspective of only economic effectiveness, it does not make sense to create disruptive space and time when

the leader could intervene and get it working (Bushe and Marshak, 2018; Bushe and Nagaishi, 2018). Should efficiency be maximized at the expense of people's development? This is the value dilemma often faced when OD practitioners are involved in change-related businesses.

With these points in mind, the author can highlight the value set of an OD perspective as a contrast to one of the other organizational schools. OD, as a "spirit of inquiry" stream, explicitly embraces its normative roots to create great organizations and inquires both means and purposes in the collaborations with clients. While most other organizational schools generally view adopting a strongly normative perspective as uncommon in its theories, as well as in its advice to practitioners, OD scholars take a normative stance in their prescriptions. Two of the most critical principles that guide them to help organizations move ahead are "engagement and inquiry" and "interest in development" that lead to what purposes an organization should seek and how it should pursue those purposes.

3) Generative leaders create containers in which multiple discourses are welcomed and crystallized into organizational strengths

Global business leaders should pursue both "organizational efficiency" by solving technical problems and "innovative challenges" by facilitating adaptive capacity. They should not only be efficient and agile in decision-making but also be welcoming to people's diversity and development in the long run. Organizing collective actions inherently involves a set of tensions described in different ways as paradoxes (Smith and Berg, 1987), polarities (Johnson, 1992), and competing values (Quinn, 1988). Leaders will usually be agitated to get the things done and will be anxious about tackling innovative challenges; their emergent and adaptive nature triggers the fears and concerns about "how hard it might be to learn something new, whether or not others will value the new behavior, or having to go through a period of reduced competence" (Marshak, 2016, p. 13). The author believes that one of the most important qualities generative leaders should embrace is to transcend their anxiety by creating containers in which multiple discourses are welcomed and crystallized into organizational strengths. Innovative creativity is well developed by welcoming and embracing diverse discourses and narratives to shape new and agreed-on ways of thinking for organizational transformation (Bushe and Marshak, 2016). Generative leaders take the risk to help stakeholders engage and inquire into crystallizing their diverse discourses and ideas into organizational strengths and global innovations.

As Bushe and Marshak (2016) aptly pointed out, how to help leaders develop such dialogic and generative ways of being, thinking, and doing is a different question to be answered. While some pioneering work developed marked ideas on this subject (Bushe 2009; Bushe and Marshak 2016; Byrne and Thatchenkery, 2018; Rowland and Higgs, 2008), future research could take account of the inquiry which is still in its infancy.

Examples of Generative Leadership from the Literature

We are living in a VUCA world with little predictable cause-effect relationships. The author has been observing that the greatest failure of leadership, applying the frame of solving technical problems to adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1998), is pervasive around the world.

However, there are some practical examples of successful generative leadership in typical adaptive and emergent business processes illustrated in the literature.

Heracleous et al. (2018) show an example that involves global stakeholders to pursue a generative change process to develop adaptive ideas and solutions. In 2015, Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikimedia, declared that all the investments at the foundation were in line with the newly developed 5-year strategic plan that uniquely inquired an open strategy process with dialogic facilitation. During the planning process, various internal and external stakeholders (i.e., Wikimedians) were invited to a dialogic inquiry to re-formulate the five emergent strategic priorities of quality content, innovation, increasing participation, growing readership, and stabilizing infrastructure in a participative and collaborative manner. Referring to “ideological” and “process” types of emergent strategy by Mintzberg and Waters (1985), the study concluded that “the multitude of Wikimedians involved in the process share common values of openness, transparency, and collaboration; but these were only able to produce a strategy when balanced with structuring and process guidelines, bringing some structure to the diverse perspectives and inputs” (Heracleous et al., 2018: p. 28).

Weisbord and Janoff (2005) introduced IKEA’s leadership challenge to reformulate strategies on the company’s product design, manufacturing, and distribution. The leadership team members were facing a global challenge to innovate IKEA’s value-chain architectures, which were too complex for the global leaders to find an effective way out. Applying the generative principle of “the whole system in the room” with its global 52 stakeholders, IKEA created a new strategic plan and formed task forces to implement it. Its aim to promote ownership and commitment of global stakeholders was inquired successfully.

Thatchenkery and Upadhyaya (1996) provided a unique example of how a grand narrative and the presence of multiple discourses traced organizational realities in a global nonprofit organization. The studied organization, the ICA, is a research and training group concerned with worldwide human resource development. Showing the dynamic framework of four different types of discourses (a continuous discourse, an introduced discourse, a cyclical discourse, and a transformed discourse), the authors explored how the different discourses in the organization had supported one another and were crystallized into a collective engagement and inquiry of the stakeholders to transform the organizational discourse of Christianity to the new discourse of valuing secularism. The study made an important contribution to showing a possibility of postmodernism in a global and organizational context, highlighting the generative nature of the change process in the discursive cycle of intensive reflexivity.

Nagaishi (2020) responded to Grant and Marshak’s (2011) call for a move toward change perspectives which emphasize the generative nature of discourses, narratives, and conversations and the question of how change practitioners discursively facilitate them in the context associated with a particular culture, namely, Japanese organizational culture. Analyzing the data of the two different Japanese organizations, the study tried to specify the conditions and sources which made generative conversations emerge and might lead to a successful change effort. Its preliminary investigation concluded that the generative nature of the change process was to convince change sponsors of the proposition that changing the dominant discourses and welcoming alternative ones could lead to a gateway to the long-term development of

organizations and themselves. Moreover, the study revealed that generative discourses and conversations were facilitated by psychological safety and trust in the external authority figure. The importance of the players' survival anxiety and talent diversity, however, might vary across the broad contexts on which the organizations culturally and institutionally depended.

Concluding Remarks

This article will be the first step to inquire into an image of discourse-based generative leadership, crystalizing core values of OD into business leaders' guiding principles. Adaptive challenges require experiments and discoveries, as well as require wrong turns and dead ends; the process is more anxiety-inducing than the one of solving deterministic technical problems. However, business leaders, embracing OD's "spirit of inquiry," are now having an image of the three principles—"promoting engagement and inquiry," "being deeply interested in development," and "creating containers with multiple discourses"—that help absorb, not avoid, their anxiety and identify the practices to create great organizations.

Such a leadership mindset is still not considered mainstream in global business settings. We are, however, facing real consequences of the bias for "solving more certain problems" over "tackling no-right-answer challenges": the lack of theoretical and practical understanding for crystallizing diverse discourses and ideas in real organizations into strengths and innovative business models. Today's business environment is global and complex enough, where OD's "spirit of inquiry" in its early days is uniquely qualified to work on with business leaders who lead a change process that engages stakeholders across the world in defining the changes they will ultimately implement. The original spirit of OD and its associated principles for generative leadership are needed in our VUCA world.

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