

How the organizing of our relationships
in working life is affecting
workplace democratization.

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1. Introduction

“Moving out of our present mental box of reality perception, will lead us on the way of changing our conception of reality. Remaining inside our mental box will confirm our existing perceptions of reality, and continue to preserve and protect our valid reality conceptions from change”.

Why is the nature of “leading” so decisive in the relationships between people at work? In search of a reasonable explanation to this question, we must look into what we are doing and thinking when we perform in the process of “leading”.

2. The vertical relationship

We find the first examples of the conceptualization of “leading” in the late 19th century. During this period of industrialization, the “leader-centred” model emerged on the workplace stage, and was referred to as “leadership”. The term “leadership” was then adopted into common usage and incorporated in the English language. The core element in leadership was the concept of command and control between leaders and followers. The leader should lead and followers should be led. This autocratic line of force was strictly based on a downward relationship between master and servant, and was characterized by a culture of domination, obedience and subservience from top to bottom. During the post-industrial period of the 20th century, numerous subsidiary leadership theories emerged, and books on “leadership” became popular. One such was the enormously influential “Scientific Management” by Fredrik Taylor (1911). In the years that followed the concept of leadership was further developed and interpreted. We might say that it evolved from a concept concerning actions directed by a leader to one of interaction between a leader and followers. This evolution was accompanied by a transition from the sole focus on a leader-as-superior, with followers as tailing instruments, to relationships characterized by interconnected actions and reactions between leader and followers. Within this modernizing frame of “leadership”, the enforced humanized aspect emphasized cooperation, collaboration and coordination between people and work-processes.

From the 1930s the Human Relation movement was established as a management discipline, and contributed to developing new perspectives in the organization of work. For example, working-teams were developed as an organizational form, and were further modified from the 1960’s onwards, through the movement of socio-technical systems.

We find an example of contemporary leadership theory in Joseph Rost's, "Leadership for the Twenty-First Century" (1991). Rost holds that "leadership" is a relationship of influence between leaders and followers. Participants practice this influence in one way or another, even where actors in the relationship are not equal. According to Rost, leadership contains four elements: (1) Relations based on influence. (2) Leaders and followers. (3) Both groups intending real change. (4) Intended changes reflecting their mutual purposes. Again, the a priori belief that Rost and other leadership scholars have shared is that leadership is based on relationships characterised by leaders and followers, organized vertically, with the leader above and the followers below.

The term "leadership", and the thinking and practice that surrounded it, developed an increasingly broad scope during the last century. Nevertheless, these main features in the relationship were sustained. Attempts to distance the term from its "leader-centred" origin, and to lend it a more equalized and mutualised image, have not changed the underlying substance of leadership:

1. The position of the leader above (to lead) and the followers below (to be led) is preserved and protected as an indisputable de facto, as if it were a law of nature.
2. The relationship between the leader and follower is unequally balanced, with the leader having the authority to decide over the followers, and the followers obliged to follow imposed decisions.
3. The relationship, regulated through leadership, is vertically organized from top to bottom, in accordance with the order of hierarchical ranking.

3. The horizontal relationship

In an effort to develop an alternative model of leading, a work-in-process began some years ago seeking to develop a model based on equally-balanced relationships in the workplace. The term "leading-ship" was introduced into the management discipline by my self in 2006 through the paper "*A change from leadership (vertical power-structure) to leading-ship (horizontal power-structure) at work*". The creation of a neologism was considered necessary because the term "leadership" had become so laden with associations, assumptions, perceptions and beliefs that yet another modified interpretation could never help establish a qualitatively new model. If real change were necessary, I felt it must involve a reorientation of language and terminology as well – a paradigm shift to help make the unthinkable thinkable, the unconceivable conceivable. The term "leading-ship" embodies the function of leading through personalized and internalized processes that involve every person in the workplace. Put simply, leading-ship consciously manifests itself as a contrast to leadership.

In my paper “*The DemoCratic Workplace*” (2009), leading-ship is characterized as:

“Leading-ship” is the expression of freedom and trust exercised by the individual human being as an autonomous person. “Leader-ship” is on the contrary the expression of subjugation to a superior authority in control of the individual human being as a subordinated person.

The participative character of “Leading-ship” establishes and maintains the values of personal influence, involvement, engagement and encouragement that are critical factors in motivating creativity, productivity and efficiency among people. Self-determination is the main outcome of leading through participation, where the individual makes self-directed decisions within his or her own area of responsibility.

The significance of “Leading-ship” is power-sharing. Sharing of power through competence-based authority enables everyone to become empowered leaders throughout their actions in their respective workplaces. When the people are in charge of their own leading-processes, they are able to assume responsibility for themselves and share responsibilities with the others in the workplace community.”

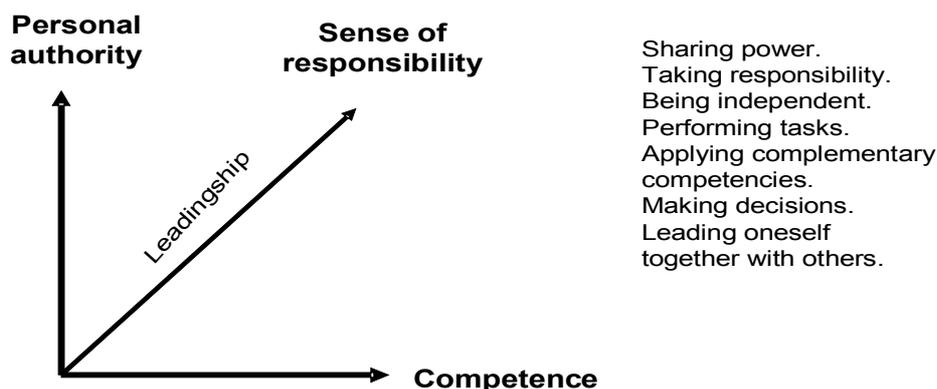
Horizontal relationships are therefore based on the construction of the following elements:

1. Everyone in the workplace is leading themselves, in concert with others.
2. Relationships between people are equally balanced by the personal authority everybody is assigned to make decisions within their own sphere of responsibility.
3. The relationships generated through “leading-ship” are horizontal organized, consisting of people on the same level operating on mutual understandings.

4. Definitions and models

In my paper “*Leading-ship vs. Leadership*” (2009), an illustration of the terminology was presented. The model and definition of “leading-ship” are as follows:

1. The model

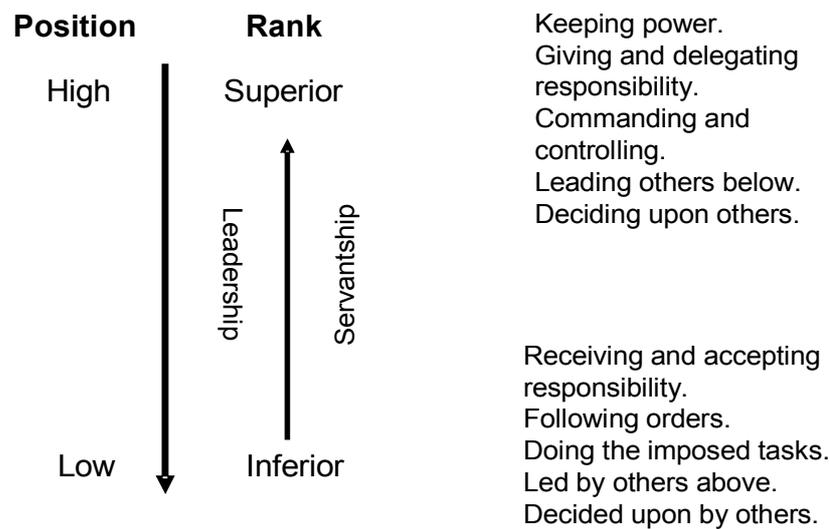


2. The definition

Leadingship is referring to the function of leading in the process of joining personal authority and individual competence throughout the performance of work. The individual person is leading oneself in mutual and equal understanding with others through a Shared Reality Conception in the workplace. Everyone is a leader within their respective area of responsibility, and have the power of authority to make individual decisions and to influence on decisions concerning their respective field of work.

In contrast, the model and definition of “leadership” are as follows:

1. The model



2. The definition

Leadership is referring to the leader as a person. The leader with the superior rank, is assigned to the task of command and control in leading the inferior subordinates to follow the imposed orders. The subordinates are awaiting orders as followers in the cause of doing their jobs and performing their work when the responsibility is given from the person in the position above. The subordinates are performing servantship in their obedience towards their superior leader.

5. Conclusion

“Leadership” has been conceived and defined as a relationship between those above and those below on a hierarchical ladder. This vertical relationship is an inherently authoritarian system, whereby a person in a higher position is assigned the authority to make decisions regarding those below. “Leading-ship” is predicated upon relationships between equals and peers, and their interaction is carried out without position or rank. “Leading-ship” is an egalitarian system, with equal dignity as the core value in shaping powerful relationships between people in the workplace.

The distinctive features and qualities of the relationship between individual human beings in the workplace are made up by the strategic choices we make in organizing the workplace society. We have in reality two main choices to our disposal as it is presented in the following overall model:

Authoritarian power system

Vertical power structure (high and low positions)

Hierarchical organizational structure (someone above as superiors and someone below as subordinates).

Leadership (leader-based work processes)

Vertical relationship (someone is leading and someone is led)

Egalitarian power system

Horizontal power structure (side-lined functions)

Egalitarian organizational structure (everyone has independent and responsible roles)

Leadingship (individual-based and collective-based work processes)

Horizontal relationship (the individual person is leading one self together with others)

“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete”.

Buckminster Fuller