

Pushes and Pulls of Leadership Forms: the Genius Loci, the Dynamic Administrator and the Space Between

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Abstract

In this workshop session I invite participants to explore the pushes and pulls of leadership in developing psychologically safe yet energised, problematised and vitalised working: it's the tension, the power bounce between order and chaos; clarity and ambiguity; overwhelm and apathy; burnout and lethargy – the sweet spot of highly innovative, creative and performative teams. How, what, where and why is leadership in this space? And what do we perceive as power flows – helpful and unhelpful? After a brief introduction to models and praxis from group psychodynamics, evolutionary psychodynamics and leadership; and a sliver of Nagarjuna, we look at several case studies from S Asia and the West to explore whether these metaphorical positions are at play, and if so, how can framing situations in this way be useful for leadership and its understanding. The ideas put forward represent a work in progress and as such I wish to encourage reflection and reflexive conversations on the what, how, what if and what next for this framework in both the academy and, more usefully, in leadership and leadership development practice.

Foundations

Neri (1998) perceived power flows and leadership across groups in therapeutic process as a dance between two key characters: the Operative Leader and the genius loci.

In Neri's world the Operative Leader is the rule setter, directing the group towards order and accomplishment of tasks. The OL deals with truth and knowledge, providing perhaps some comfort in clarity and direction.

The Genius Loci on the other hand works as a 'figure of emotional relevance' working with 'the emotional heritage and vitality' (ibid) of all that came before and all that brings life. The Genius Loci has a weaving activity, helping the group become, be and stay as group. It holds the essence of 'group' promoting happiness, thoughtfulness and even pain – sometimes promoting chaos and confusion in an attempt to (re) vitalise and evolve. It negates the need for an 'other' hence is strongly linked to identity. And is very much of place, the spirit of where and here.

Neri's work, as you've probably guessed, draws on the formative ideation of Wilfred Bion and his Work and Primitive Groups.

In Neri's world the Operative Leader and the Genius Loci are not and cannot be the same person, the Operative Leader role often being played by the therapist with the Genius Loci by a client in group. The tensions and power flows between the two flows feed from and feed into the transpersonal area of the group, shaping and being shaped by the atmosphere, the medium of communication, what has come before and the assumptions, the 'base mentality' of all.

Schlappobersky (2015), also working in group analytics, refers to a 'conductor' role who leads by providing structure to the group through processes of Dynamic Administration, which include rule setting, mediation, meaning making and the foundational work of managing space, timings, conduct etc.

Kevin Flinn takes this dynamic administration process into the leadership development realm in his recent book (2018) based in the language of complexity theory and finds the DA process to be indispensable in a leadership development (learning) group scenario, providing relief and safety for the group to emerge.

Are the Operative Leader / Dynamic Administrator and the Genius Loci both roles, practices or forms of leadership?

Neri was quite clear that the Genius Loci is not a leader (2015), however he claims that the "Genius Loci" function rotates among the members of a group'. Views from both a post-heroic and a critical leadership perspective might afford this dynamic function or process (I hesitate to invoke the furies of calling it a 'practice') to be one of leadership. It has power through influence (albeit possibly tacit, probably disruptive and potentially subversive) and through nurturing of social identity (after Haslam et

al 2011) certainly in the sense of ‘being one of us’ and ‘crafting a sense of us’.

My assertion is that the playing of both roles, whether held separately in multiple people or within one, are an important and impactful facet of leadership, and more, that the holding of the tension between, the fuzzy boundaries, of these roles, is a critical leadership action-inaction: the positive-negative capability point where the good stuff of organisational, team and idea evolution happens best.

I’ve spent the last two years working with different organisations and groups in Nepal, India and the UK growing this notion (I’m not sure it’s a theory, or even a model) and then observing, applying and growing a practice and experiences with the notion-at-play under the guise of leadership and leadership development.

My hope is to stimulate a rich, robust conversation that stretches, tests and expands this work drawing on the experience, skills and knowledge in the room.

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