Managing Above the Graft: How Management Needs its Fertile Wounds from which Imagination can Grow

by **David Russell**

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how the incorporation of metaphoric and poetic ways of thinking into the evaluation of a leadership development programme both captured the imagination of the employees and benefited the core business of a manufacturing production plant. Qualitative data evaluating the effectiveness of a substantial leadership programme were presented back to all members of a manufacturing plant (executive and non-executive) in the form of composite narratives over an eighteen-month period. Recommendations were derived from the text of the narrative and were progressively implemented. Such was the positive response to the written narratives that senior management asked the researchers to present the narratives in the form of a 'live' performance. Evaluation through qualitative methodology lends itself to an imaginative interpretation and presentation. Although qualitative and quantitative data tend to be regarded as complementary in applied research, it was management's decision to employ only a qualitative process in this instance. The decision was fortuitous, given that the leadership development programme was initially judged to be a failure, as it triggered a subsequent imaginative engagement that turned a failure into a success.

Introduction

Management literature has increasingly recognized that to mimic the aspirations of science by distancing itself from poetic and metaphoric ways of thinking and speaking would be counterproductive to an enterprise's core business (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1994). Yet the pragmatic demands of business insist, above all, on transparency of decision making, policy planning and its implementation, and on having a keen eye for the bottom line. The reconciliation of the apparent conflict between these two positions is the focus of this paper. The data presented derives from an evaluative study of the effectiveness of a leadership development programme conducted in a production plant of a multi-national manufacturing corporation based in Australia.

Leadership as Lived Experience

The leadership development programme aimed at creating a high level of transformational leadership in the designated leadership team of twenty-eight and extended over a period of eighteen months. The change model used by the implementation team was one of personal development and inner leadership (Bass, 1985). The intended effect was that the individual change would "cascade down" throughout the organisation. The aim was to involve the "whole" person (thoughts, images, emotions, judgements) and for the learning to be experiential rather than conceptual.

A phenomenological approach (Polkinghorne, 1989, 1995) was employed that used the lived experience of the participants in the study to both construct

descriptions of, and ascribe significance to, any learning that took place due to the intervention of the leadership development programme. This body of experience was evaluated for change over the time of the study.

The author was involved only in the evaluation of the programme and not in its implementation.

Research Approach

In-depth interviews were conducted prior to the launching of the programme, midway through, and six months after the conclusion of the intervention. Participants comprised the entire leadership team (n = 28), a sample of executive staff directly reporting to members of the leadership team (n = 8) and a sample of operational and administrative support staff (n = 7).

Inviting the participants to speak of their actual experience of leadership over the duration of the programme was used to assess the effectiveness of the programme. Interviews explored each individual's experience by open-ended questioning focused across five themes, namely *sense of self, enjoyment of work, quality of relationships, capacity to take action* and *openness to change*. Given that these themes reflected the general content of the planned change programme, effectiveness was gauged by monitoring experienced changes over time. For each of the three phases of the research (before, middle and end), interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. From the individual transcriptions, a series of composite narratives was configured that created an unfolding plot over time, and concluded with a number of outcomes that represented an explanatory story.

Narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) was used to draw together the diverse threads of events and experiences and integrate them into a whole.[1] The data (transcripts of the interviews) were scrutinized for individual events and verbal expressions that provided an understanding of how leadership was experienced. The eventual composite narrative was shaped by the interaction of motives and events coupled with the tension of opposing forces. The result was an emplotted narrative offering an account of how the final outcome had come about.[2] In all, there were six narrative accounts: three expressing the experience of the leadership team, and three representing the experience of those reporting to the members of the leadership team.

Narrative Analysis

Narratives as Data with Poetic and Metaphoric Qualities

The aim in composing a narrative was that language would become much more than an instrument of communication. While not strictly poetic, the narrative form endows language with emotion, imagery and a dynamic that simultaneously conveys a 'story' to the world and expresses moments that touch the human heart. The narrative stays with the richness of human experience and lets the experience, in all its complexity and contradiction, speak for itself. As Steele (1986) points out, "narratives do not prove; they tell and retell stories which being true to experience … are always a confabulation of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real" (p. 268).

Bachelard (1983), a philosopher of science and analyst of the imagination, when speaking of the inevitable rupture that change brings, uses the agricultural metaphor of *grafting* whereby the farmer removes parts of one plant and implants it on another. First there is rupture, and then there is life-bringing healing. He writes:

> The *graft* seems to be a concept essential for understanding human psychology. In my opinion it is the human stamp, the specifying mark of the human imagination. In my view, mankind imagining is the transcendent aspect of *natura naturans*. It is the graft which can truly provide the material imagination with an exuberance of forms… .
> It forces the seedling to bloom and gives substance to the flower … . Art is grafted upon nature. (Bachelard, 1983, p. 10)

The implication is that business can often be like mindless nature: a relatively unconscious flow of materials and information designed into a process that gets the job done efficiently and effectively. Yet events do not always go according to plan, failures

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[1] Polkinghorne argues for the usefulness of the meaning-producing operation of the narrative plot. "Plot is the narrative structure through which people understand and describe the relationship among the events and choices of their lives. Plots function to compose or configure events into a story by: (a) delimiting a temporal range which marks the beginning and end of the story, (b) providing criteria for the selection of events to be included in the story, (c) temporally ordering events into an unfolding movement culminating in a conclusion, and (d) clarifying or making explicit the meaning events have as contributors to the story as a unified whole" (Polkinghorn, 1995, p. 7).

[2] The actual narratives, six in total, were documented in the Final Report to the client. It was the client's wish that its corporate identity not be made public, but permission was given for the research work to be referred to in any scholarly publication.

happen, and it is these wounds that then invite in the imagination. From these wounds, with the healing initiative of the graft, flowers bloom. In other words, imagination, metaphor, and the poetic moment all assume a fruitful place when management is skilled enough to see the failed expectations, the business wounds both personal and corporate, as the opportunity to graft art upon nature. This study reports on a leadership development programme that began with high expectations of transformational change, but that initially failed to deliver the desired results. The argument presented in this paper is that, when change and/or apparent failure are part of an interaction, one shaped largely by metaphor and imagery, then the desired transformation is a much more likely outcome.

Each of the six narratives was structured around a plot with a conscious use of both image and metaphor in order to organize experience without needing, or expecting, to pin it down in any final sense. This is the virtue of metaphor, and by extension of the poetic. The making of meaning is partly in the language itself and not solely, in a positivist sense, in the 'reality' being named. The narratives not only reflected on the experience of being in the leadership programme, but they *created* new experience. In short, the narratives named, evoked and created meaning; as such, they expanded consciousness even as they organized it.

Narrative Making as a Collaborative Process
Two sets of collaboration are represented in the narrative construction. Firstly, there is the engagement of the researcher and participant in the flow of events from the initial conversation through to the semi-formal interviews, to the written transcripts that were themselves the subject of review by each interviewee, to the draft report, and finally to the dramatic performance. The researcher and the interviewee were each a witness to the other's performance. At each stage the work-in-progress was collaboratively 'owned'. This experience was more than a simple exchange of information, as researcher and participant moved into the metaphorical space together.

The second collaboration was at an individual's biological level between the limbic system and cerebral cortex. The acknowledged aim, both in eliciting an individual's story-of-experience and in the researcher's composition of the narrative, was the valuing of the emotional or limbic aspects of speech. The researcher was explicit in stating that language was not solely a vehicle that transmitted a logical proposition. The research stance was based on the established understanding that "we often interpret sentences more 'primitively', looking for the emotional or limbic aspects of speech, even before we bother with the semantic aspects" (Flaherty, 2004, p. 197). Meaning making is a two-part process, in that it has both a temporal lobe or semantic component and a limbic or emotional component. Metaphors are essential in uniting the cognitive and emotional meaning of a statement. As neuroscientist Flaherty (2004) says: "The way the two are integrated has everything to do with the way our brains work. Metaphor's resonance comes from its ability to activate not only the cerebral cortex's cognitive and sensory networks, but also the limbic system's affective and motivational networks" (p. 230).

Narratives as Emblems of the Way Participants Engage and Embrace the Experience of Leadership
Individual transcripts were evaluated with an eye for the strength of the emotion and/or the image. Characteristically the favoured feature was an image awash-with-emotion. Each composite narrative was an attempt to locate the dialogue of complexes (the pattern of different valuations that individuals expressed) within a meaningful plot. What the psychologist Hillman calls the "Lautréamont complex", referring to Bachelard's text on poetic imagination (Bachelard, 1986), was applied as a framework-of-understanding to the transcripts of interviews. Each transcript was analysed for a Lautréamont complex which was identified by (1) a specific combination of images, metaphors, reveries that are not themes but, rather, poetic images (i.e., shaped by an emotion), and (2) the force of the complex that was found in the dynamic of contradictory images: " … antagonism is not balanced away but contradiction is held side by side … the force of a complex, what gives it its dynamism, is the sum of contradictions it amasses in itself" (Hillman, 1986, pp. 108-110).

As an illustration of the Lautréamont complex, with its patterning of contradictory images and emotions, extracts from the two sequences of narratives are presented in the following section. These extracts are from the three evaluative events representing the beginning, middle and end of the leadership programme.

Narratives of the Leaders Experiencing the Change Programme
Firstly, prior to the actual intervention, the group (as reflected in their composite narrative) have in mind the image of "awaiting the Messiah". Such has been the build up and the support from top management that there is a feeling of "possibly, just possibly, this might be the occasion of real change". The expectation of change is underscored by fear … "Will

all this be another re-organization, part of the usual five-year cycle, or will we actually change the rules this time?" The shaping emotion is a combination of fear ("This is not a workplace where one can take an emotional risk!" and "The implications of a cultural change are totally unknown") and desire ("I want to be able to comprehend the role of human feelings in human behaviour").

Secondly, midway through the programme, the same group is in the midst of emotional turmoil, needing to "take on faith" that "*growing* peoples in order to achieve profits" will actually work. On the ground there is conflict between organizational goals and personal development. The dominant image is one of "learning to ride a push bike but feeling the constant need to keep the training wheels on". There is felt scepticism to do with any generalization of benefits from the personal level to the plant level: "It's working for us but not for the troops … at least, not yet!"

And, finally, at the conclusion of the programme, the overarching image was of "untidiness" and a feeling of fragmentation: "It was as if the whole group had lost its voice." A number of *elephants* (big but unspoken issues) were in the kitchen. The most prominent was that "We got distracted from the main game!" A certain elitism had been reinforced, a certain "them and us" between the leadership team and those reporting to them. As leaders, "we work better within the group but not so good when it comes to between individual leaders and their staff." This attitude was further underscored by the accepted philosophy of seeking to first "get our act together as a leadership group" but in doing this "we forgot about the necessity of doing the hard day-to-day work with the troops".

Narratives of Those Participants in the Study Outside of the Leadership Team

Before the international consultant arrived on the scene, there was a dominant sense in the workforce that communicating for change just doesn't happen in the plant and that all the training of leaders hadn't made any impact: "I've been here a long time and I've seen it all. Nothing ever changes!" The atmosphere of the many "closed-door meetings" created a feeling of deep cynicism in all those excluded, especially given that senior management was intending to "spend mega dollars on improving communication ... It doesn't need communication meetings to communicate!" More than anything else, the non-executive staff expressed the desire to "feel more trust … people say one thing and then do other things".

Six months into the leadership development programme, the sense of confusion had increased. There was a strong sense that the bosses were away a lot "getting into their feelings … yet most seem to be unable or unwilling to tell us what is happening". The conclusion was that a couple had totally changed their behaviour and, as a consequence, one worker reported: "I find my manager a bit weird and even scary, because he's now asking me not only for the normal levels of respect but wants me to share my feelings and wants me to deepen my relationships with others around me." The ever-present disparity between saying "You are part of the team!" and the next moment doing something that says "No, you're not!" was increasingly frustrating. "Had we been asked what we wanted we would have said: 'More delivery on ideas; less effort expended on being accommodating; better two-way communication; decisions on what decisions we should make ourselves and what we shouldn't; and, finally, engage with us about any major changes in the workplace.' But we were never asked!"

When the leadership development programme had come and gone, the general consensus amongst the 'workers' was: "There has been no real benefit to the manufacturing plant … So many promises were made and so little to show for it! … We see some changes in those who were already pretty good at communicating and no changes in those who could never do it … And still no specifics are being mentioned about what actually happened in all those away-day sessions with the team of change agents: Perhaps they are embarrassed! … If anything, the distance between the hierarchy and the staff has increased: They still don't listen … yeah, they listen and talk to each other but they don't really talk to us!"

Narratives as Displays of Fertile Wounds where Learning Could Occur

Had the evaluation finished at this stage, then a sense of failure would have been the predominant feeling. Failed expectations would have been reinforced. It was the case that the narratives conveyed positive intentions but revealed flawed outcomes. The tension inherent in the contradictory findings was keenly felt by both executive and non-executive staff, and this quickly became a creative tension needing a resolution. Management had never heard of Bachelard's understanding of how the poetic word and human imagination act in the same manner as an agricultural graft; how a graft inscribes the plant with new cultural meaning. Management did recognize the need, however, for a creative next step. Something akin to the flow of the narratives was suggested by senior management that would help trigger action strategies in groups comprised of both executive and non-executive staff. Dramatic presentations by two

researchers[3], one playing the part of the composite executive and the other playing the part of the composite non-executive, of each of the six narratives were proposed and subsequently preformed. The narratives were an act of marking (similar to the cut for the graft) and the performance dramas were a remarkable recognition of the transformative power of the poetic and imaginative stance.

It is the argument of this paper that the action strategies, jointly engaged in by both the members of the leadership team and the executive and non-executive staff who did not receive the 'benefit' of the change programme, resulted from the twofold experience (positive intentions/flawed outcomes) of the narratives. The power of the metaphor and the poetic image stirred the emotions and the beginnings of effective action followed. The point was made by Housman during his 1933 lecture "The Name and Nature of Poetry" that the peculiar function of poetry (and here poetry has been extended to include image and metaphor) was not to transmit thought, but to transfuse emotion: "to set in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer" (quoted in Graves, 1979, pp. 253-254). The dramatic images were effective largely because of the rich emotional content that characterized the interpersonal and metaphoric space created by the research. Housman extends this point when he argues that "poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it" (Graves, 1979, p. 254).

An unexpected finding in this evaluative study was that the apparent failure of the leadership development programme, as experienced by the bulk of the plant's workforce, was the starting point for constructive joint action. What was even more significant, however, was the very specific manner in which the wound was experienced and subsequently expressed in metaphor and poetic imagery that triggered the desired movement. As the scientist and poet who gave us the metaphor of grafting has written: "the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface" (Bachelard, 1994, p. xxiii).

It would be all too easy to imply that the metaphor and poetic imagery were somehow more than a trigger and, by doing so, to suggest a more causative influence. On reflection, what the new collaborative action did highlight was the mutual reinforcing of the emotional stirring and the supportive leadership context that could hold, appreciate and utilise this movement. Goffee and Jones (2001), in summarising a decade of sociological and psychological literature

for a special issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, remind their readers that followers' emotional experience is critical to leadership success: "The follower wants the leader to create feelings of significance, community, and excitement …" (p.148). Without this positive feeling-based environment, it is likely that little or no improvement would have been forthcoming. It is not the author's intention to suggest that major changes were implemented as a consequence of the 'fertile wounds', but rather that the conditions for effective leadership, as suggested by Goffee and Jones, were now in place. It is worth elaborating on the three emotional responses that, together, constitute the experience of effective leadership. The first is the feeling of significance: the individual needs to be valued. The second is a feeling of community: a unity of purpose around work and a willingness to relate to one another as human beings. And, finally, there needs to be a feeling of excitement: work is to be challenging and have an edge to it. The groundwork for effective joint action was already in place; in fact, the whole initiative of the leadership development programme was an on-the-ground example of relating to staff as significant individuals who have a desire for community and leading edge involvements.
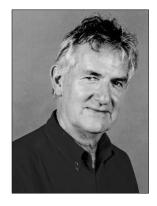
Conclusion

Metaphors and heightened images have always found a place in management studies due to the recognized need for motivational states that encourage desired action. The characteristic bloodlessness of scientific and technical writing has rarely found favour as a strategy of practising managers. What makes this study unique is the careful use of failure to achieve practical outcomes. However, it is not failure per se that makes the difference; rather, it is the particular language of image and emotion. As psychologists acknowledge, language was the first mood-altering substance. It can improve mood and worsen mood (Evans, 2001, p. 75), thus specifying the action that will follow. Research, even qualitative research, has favoured a modulated and measured tone over one that is overtly dramatic and emotional. Yet, as humans, we are constructed by evolutionary processes to add limbic music to the cortical drone (Murray, 1992, p. 16) when we need to get a difficult job done and, in particular, when apparent failure (so much part of the human condition) is the order of the day.

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[3] Dr Claire Jankelson was the associate researcher and co-dramatist (see Jankelson, 2006).

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David Russell is an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Western Sydney, NSW, Australia. His orientation to psychology, in both teaching and research, is one of emphasising the phenomenology of any dynamic network of images, and especially the emotional impact of these images on one's daily living. Practical applications have included the experiences of wild-dog predation, organisational leadership, fearful events, and trauma.

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