
Learning for leadership

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Addresses the question of whether individuals, using psychoanalytic insights, can learn from their experience of leadership. Believes that leaders can develop insights in an experiential manner and concludes that most develop them by listening, hearing and responding.

Introduction

Kenneth Rice published *Learning for Leadership: Interpersonal and Intergroup Relations* in 1965. The book is a mixture of report of a process and theoretical reflection on it. The process later evolved into the so-called "Tavistock" model of learning through the study of group relations in conferences. The first of these was held in 1957, when a conference for training in group relations was organized by the University of Leicester and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. Subsequently conferences have been held at least annually. They have been sponsored by different bodies over the years, but they are now widely known as "The Leicester" or "The Tavistock Conference". The pattern of working has been replicated in many countries and some evolution in design has occurred (Miller, 1989). Yet, although books and articles have been produced, Kenneth Rice's original work has not been superseded. Nor has the capacity of such conferences to disturb settled positions and to encourage new learning diminished. Someone who recently attended a conference in the USA included the following paragraph in his report to his colleagues:

The thing that intrigues me about the Tavistock perspective is that it provides an extremely well developed vocabulary, logic and (most important) practice for understanding and engaging with what I increasingly see as a key dimension of work in the new economy – the place where the personal and the organizational, the "private" and the "public" intersect. At a time when, arguably, acuity about interpersonal and organizational dynamics is becoming an important part of what it means to be an effective manager, the conference exposed me to a powerful way of building a kind of insight, a way that I want to explore further (Howard, 1995).

The writer has grasped the essence of the approach. There are today many who offer to teach leadership. Books on the topic proliferate and seminars abound. Their effectiveness is evaluated by the measurable impact that they immediately make on individuals and organizations. The approach developed by Rice and his colleagues is explicitly different. It is founded not on teaching but on learning.

An example of how this approach both emerged and was radically applied may be seen in a development that occurred at an early stage in the life of these conferences. The design originally included a series of academic lectures. These had two purposes: to provide some theoretical framework and "to provide a familiar form of *teaching* (my italics) in what is otherwise an unfamiliar ... and strange experience" (Rice, 1965, p. 126). The lectures were soon abandoned in favour of further experiential working: the residual, and probably dependent, reliance on the familiar and on teaching was superseded by the underlying commitment to learning. The general task – however it is refined in specific conferences – is to offer people opportunities that they may or may not use for themselves in whatever way they choose and their colleagues allow. The corollary of this is a sceptical view about what may or may not be learned. Every conference is a new construction. And because of the intensity of the experience of participation there is a corresponding wariness of any immediate learning. These two points produce a third: little is written about what may be learned, since this might appear to begin to circumscribe the openness of the whole approach. Rice wrote:

In the field of human relations he [the trainer] can provide opportunities for learning; he can teach little or nothing. Those who come as students must have the chance of learning or not learning, as they wish, or at least of learning at their own pace. The process of learning is a process of "internalization", of incorporating felt experience into the inner world of fantasy and reason (Rice, 1965, p. 24).

A similar looseness about both process and outcome continues. The brochure advertising the 1995 Leicester Conference typically offers only:

To provide opportunities to study the exercise of authority through the interpersonal, inter-group and institutional relations that develop within the conference institution.

Learning

Underlying the theory of this approach to learning about leadership is a psychoanalytically

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informed stance. But this does not imply that the task itself lies somewhere in the field of group psychoanalysis. Occasionally language may be employed which appears to bring the two themes together, such as when someone speaks of “the psychoanalysis of organizations” (de Board, 1978), but this is a confusion of categories. Even less does a psychoanalytically informed stance imply that the participants are drawn from the therapeutic professions. The earliest conferences had a preponderance of non-therapist members, although there has been a discernible shift in members’ backgrounds towards those who are therapeutically trained. Many styles of learning about group process have evolved since the 1950s and some make claims to connections with the Tavistock approach. But the core of the design which Rice and his colleagues initiated remains an educational stance. Personal values and needs are inevitably explored. Indeed many participants in such conferences find that they become caught up in changes in their personal and professional lives. Nevertheless, such matters remain for the scrutiny of the individual participant and are not exposed as material for the conference as a whole.

To offer learning opportunities is a different activity from that of making promises of teaching. Not surprisingly, therefore, some of the major theoretical advances based on the series of group relations conferences have occurred in thinking about the sort of learnings that are entailed. Barry Palmer has elegantly described the process of learning that can be discerned in the conference approach. Enlarging a theory of Bateson (1972) he discerns three levels of learning. Level 1 is that of merely noting some new phenomena. Members of a conference, for example, as they join the process are often amazed by their experiences. They mostly discover that there seems to be an unconscious process at work in a group. Little more may be said: the experience itself is all for the moment. Level 2 moves from experience towards new insight. This is especially likely to involve reflection on the way that conscious and unconscious processes interact. How these two levels of learning occur and are experienced has again been well described by Howard (1995):

Participating in this conference was not easy. Indeed, on the purely personal level it was often confusing, frustrating and occasionally painful. I have some questions in my mind as to whether this is a function of the particular Tavistock method or whether it is inherent to authority and group life. At the beginning of the conference I was more inclined to the former view (*Level 1*). But as

the conference progressed I began to see the value of the method and how it could be used to learn things about my own experience of authority and leadership that I would never get access to in a more traditional setting (*Level 2*)[1].

Level 3, however, involves a major shift to a different set of inputs and responses. It is concerned with change, as the participant discovers “a capacity to doubt the validity of perceptions which seem unquestionably true” (Palmer, 1979, p. 142). In a later study Palmer, in collaboration with McCaughan (1994), has extended this thinking by using ideas from Torbert and Fisher (Torbert, 1991; Torbert and Fisher, 1992). In this book they have made the shift from learning in general to explicit learning about leadership. They note that what Palmer originally called Level 3 learning requires both involvement and detachment. It is a sophisticated stance and one which can be learned only through both experience and mature reflection on experience. If someone is to learn to lead, then this capacity for detachment will be a distinguishing mark:

Dysfunctional and unjust organizations can only be transformed by men and women who are capable of and committed to a reflexive process of learning The catch is that ... it appears that very few people approach life with this sort of non-attachment to the fundamental distinctions by which they define themselves (Palmer and McCaughan, 1994, p. 100).

The style of learning

Rice and his colleagues devised a model for learning that has on the whole remained intact over the years. Each of its three basic components is simple in itself. They are: holding, dynamics and the group focus. Many educational events are offered which contain one or more of these. For example, a teacher in a classroom has to sustain a holding environment if the pupils are to risk themselves in order to change through learning. Over the years, too, as a result of the impact of therapeutically founded thinking on groups and their behaviour, some awareness of the importance of discerning a prevailing dynamic has become commonplace. Even, though possibly less so, the primacy of the group may be acknowledged. The originality of Rice’s design as a means for learning for leadership lies in the way that the three are combined and allowed to interact.

Holding

The “holding environment” was first fully described by Winnicott (1960). Focusing on

the bond between mother and child, he discerned the environment which is required if fundamental human development is to occur. The mother has to be sufficiently empathetic (in Winnicott's memorable phrase, "good enough") and able to tolerate aggression. Only so will the child gain a sense of self-esteem and discover that his or her powerful impulses can be used creatively without destroying relationships. One consequence of the elaboration of this theory is that greater attention has since been paid to the family as a system rather than as an agglomeration of individuals (Shapiro, 1982). Rice does not use this language, but implicit in the design of the conference that he describes is the need for sufficient holding for the members. He derives this thinking from Bion's work on groups which has been and remains seminal (Bion, 1961), though not slavishly. One task of the staff is to provide the conditions which are necessary for any regression by the members and containment of their aggression and disarray. They do this principally by working to time and territory and to the educational task, especially by eschewing tendencies to therapeutizing.

Dynamics

At any moment during a group relations conference four different contributors to the prevailing dynamics can be discerned. How they interrelate and interact is always complex, but this is the node around which learning most occurs. The four are:

- 1 the individual member;
- 2 the specific event;
- 3 the occasion within the event; and
- 4 the conference as a whole.

Rice addresses this complexity in *Learning for Leadership* (1965). But neither there, nor in subsequent writings by him or others, is there a successful attempt to convey the experience. It is something that has to be undergone. Nevertheless, we can to some extent clarify the dynamics.

During the conference the member is somewhere on a spectrum from using others to being used by them. The individual works with his or her internal world in the context of both what is being projected into and from the self. This experience is intense, but it also takes place within a specific event. This may be, for instance, a small study group, a large study group or an intergroup event, but this event itself runs for a series of sessions during which the individual's experience will alter considerably as different dynamics prevail. In particular the unconscious activity which manifests itself in basic assumption behaviour is here discerned[2]. But all

such events can also be reduced to their component sessions, which brings a new dynamic to bear: what is happening between separate sessions that brings about a change within the next one? For example, take a small study group event of 12 sessions. The event builds up its own dynamic culture: it is held in the same place, with the same members and the same consultant. It becomes familiar. Indeed amid the stresses of a conference it may even seem sometimes so familiar that it becomes "home". Yet the interactive dynamic between the system of that event and the rest of the conference is compounded by the unconscious behaviour of the group within the series of 12 meetings, and all this takes place within the setting of the conference as a whole, which generates yet another dynamic.

It is in thinking in this area perhaps that most developments have occurred since Rice's original work. In particular two topics become prominent. First, is it possible to talk about institutional transference and counter-transference? These themes, especially the former, have a long history in individual psychoanalysis. Recently, however, they have been perceived to be available for study in organizations. In a group relations conference the consultant works out of his or her counter-transference. By that is understood the idea that feelings which are generated in the consultant as he or she works with a group are clues to what is happening in the group as a whole. Rice does not use this language and Bion (1961) is cautious with it. But when we realize, as Freud recognized, that transference is a universal phenomenon, the idea of institutional counter-transference becomes intelligible. Second, the distinction between "relationship" and "relatedness". The former implies at least some personal contact. But the idea of "relatedness" is more subtle: it describes the sort of connectedness that we have with notions that are in the mind. The concept of "the institution in the mind", although the phrase was not used by Rice, has become crucial in thinking about how we learn for leadership. I return to this below.

The group focus

Third, the approach adumbrated by Rice unequivocally makes the group the focus of attention and interpretation. This is not, as with a therapy group, a means to assist the individual in greater self-awareness and understanding. The group itself, and the group alone, is the focus of the study. In so far as, therefore, this is worked at, the experience of such learning is always to enlarge the boundaries. The individual, for instance, discovers how he or she is always also part of

a social construct. Indeed for many during the conference there may be an experience of personal dissolution: where does the group end and "I" begin? But the group, too, is always part of a larger group – for example, the conference as a whole. And then that too becomes self-consciously part of even larger groups, such as nations or cultures. Such enlarging creates its own new dilemmas. Barnes (1984) recounts how trainee social workers were thrilled by the way that their horizons were being enlarged through an applied form of conference learning. Ultimately, however, they discounted it on the grounds that it made the scope of their work too vast and would therefore require that they first did "world therapy" before they could deal with an individual client. The risk of grandiosity is obvious. The way in which it can be dealt with is through two discoveries: first, the importance of idea of a boundary; and second, the significance of role.

A typical conference brochure may include the following:

Members will be able to explore the boundary between person and role and between the inner and outer worlds of the individual. They can investigate various kinds of discrepancies: between an officially designated role and that which the individual seems called upon by the group to adopt; or between the authority formally delegated by a superior; the authority sanctioned by subordinates, colleagues to clients, and the actual or imputed personal power that the individual brings to his or her role Leadership may or may not be vested in a designated leader. To lead may be thought of as managing a boundary between what is inside and what is outside. For example, there are boundaries between one group and another, between a group and the organization, and between an organization and its environment The kinds of institutions which we have also express underlying processes in society. Political and economic ideologies and the assumptions about human behaviour that are associated with them influence the sort of institutions that we think we need. Effective management of organizations, therefore, requires some understanding of processes in society as well as of what may be expected of an organization and its leadership in the wider social context[3].

The originality of Rice's design and why it can be claimed to offer a unique approach to learning for leadership lies in the way that holding, dynamics and the primacy of the group are held together. From this mixture emerges a key concept for learning for leadership: the idea of an institution in the mind.

Institution and organization

A core event in a modern group relations conference is the Intergroup Event which developed into the Institutional Event. The Intergroup Event is an activity between groups where the staff are available to the members as consultants. By contrast the Institutional Event aims to examine the foundations of the conference institution as a whole, with all participants, whatever their formal roles, present in the study[4]. In recent years there has been a discussion as to precisely what is available for study. Is it the institution or is it the organization? In the brochure for the Leicester Conference 1995, for example, the description reads;

This event enables the study of the relatedness between the Working Conference, the Training Group and the Staff *in the conference as an organization* (my italics).

By contrast in 1994, and with variations for most times previously, it read:

This event involves all members and staff, and concentrates on studying the relatedness between them in the context of *the conference institution as a whole* (my italics).

It may seem recondite to discuss the difference between institution and organization in these texts. But the difference is important for the theme of learning for leadership, for it draws attention to one of the most useful concepts that has emerged in the socio-technical approach which underlies conference and consultancy work. This is the notion of the "institution in the mind". Where what is inside and what is outside come together the "institution in the mind" is generated. Specifically it is made up of the projections and fantasies of all concerned (and that can be a very wide range of people). These become negotiation points as people deal with each other and create the notion of an institution with which they work and around which they join:

An organization is composed of the diverse fantasies and projections of its members. Everyone who is aware of an organization, whether a member of it or not, has a mental image of how it works. Though these diverse ideas are not often consciously negotiated or agreed upon among the participants, they exist. In this sense, all institutions exist in the mind and it is in interaction with these in-the-mind entities that we live (Shapiro and Carr, 1991, p. 70)[5].

An example of this concept may be drawn from my own professional background. I work in Bristol Cathedral, one of the ancient cathedrals of the Church of England. To be Dean of Bristol is to hold a wide range of roles, some of them obvious and others

occupying a place in people's unconscious expectations. An instance of the first might be as chairman of the executive body of the cathedral; the latter would be mobilized when I function as a priest in liturgy or pastoral care. Among these roles is that of fund-raiser. To persuade people to give, however, requires that I tap into and negotiate with people's sense of the "cathedral in the mind". A cathedral stirs up powerful fantasies and the associated projections are often painful. Yet this mix creates the "cathedral in the mind" every time someone or some group gives to Bristol Cathedral. The institution that they are supporting is not just what they see, although there is that external reality. As they give they also mobilize an internal construct "in the mind". At the same time, of course, the cathedral in my mind (and in my colleagues' minds) is also renegotiated.

We may therefore propose a distinction which is important for thinking about leadership. There is on the one hand the institution, which is ultimately a complicated set of unconscious constructs in the mind. And on the other there is the organization, that aspect of the institution that invites conscious reflection and handling. The two themes are not separable. It is difficult to conceive of an institution that does not require some organization. The connection is also illuminating for the twin themes of leadership and management which have become confused. We might make the following distinction. An institution, being an unconscious construct, requires leadership. This calls for the capacity to be sensitive to how powerfully oneself and others function in the area of fantasy and projection. Without some awareness of these dimensions to life, both of individuals (including oneself) and of groups and corporate bodies, the dynamic attachment that people feel to one another and to their institutions will be undervalued. The result can be an increasing, but usually not articulated, sense of discomfort with the institution and even dissociation from it. By contrast, the organization is that which requires management. It is the area where remedies for problems can be supplied – a change in the system, an external consultancy or new technology. These are not to be discounted, but they prove illusory as solutions to dynamic issues that reside in the mind. We might speculate that one of the skills of the genuine leader is to be able to hold these two facets of institution and organization together without forsaking one for the other.

For illustration I will develop further the example that I began above. The Dean of Bristol is the focus for many projections and

undoubtedly a myriad fantasies. It is difficult to know in prospect what to do in that role, although I am made acutely and uncomfortably aware of it when I get things wrong. This is because I am operating largely in the area of unconscious activity that surrounds any public figure. But at the same time I am, among my other roles, chairman of the board (called the Chapter), chief executive, teacher, preacher, administrator, spiritual guide, representative and so on. The role of Dean, which relates chiefly to the institution of the Cathedral, cannot be accurately described in terms of management: on the whole I have to interpret it to myself and others, but there is little that I actually manage. Leadership – that is, someone who can sustain a working vision for all concerned with the life of the Cathedral that they are part of a whole – for all its richness and complications – is always demanded, and in the series of other roles I am required to manage much.

It would appear, therefore, to be important for today's learning for leadership to re-establish a working distinction between "institution" and "organization". The former essentially resides in the unconscious and calls for leadership; the latter is largely to be found and dealt with in the conscious world and requires management. There is obviously a danger in so simple a classification and any such dichotomy is suspect: what is split off from what? But as a working definition it has value. It also explains some of the problems that we see in institutions today. For the demands of the organization call for people who will get things done and, on the whole, disregard or discount the unconscious. By contrast the concept of institution calls for leadership, but to exercise that essentially interpretative function may today be regarded as to over-conceptualize and complicate the theory and practice of management. Even if this way of seeing institutions and organizations rings true, it may be seen as trying to deal with what is either inaccessible or the preserve of the individual alone, namely the unconscious.

About the first conferences Kenneth Rice wrote:

I am now working on the assumption that the primary task of the residential conferences ... is to provide those who attend with opportunities to learn about leadership. Leadership involves sensitivity to the feelings and attitudes of others, ability to understand what is happening in a group at the unconscious as well as the conscious level and skill in acting in ways that contribute to, rather than hinder, task performance. *But increased sensitivity and understanding are means, not ends, and the end is the*

production of more effective leaders and followers (Rice, 1965, p. 5) (my italics).

He then went on to explain that he could not easily distinguish leadership from management – a problem not peculiar to him.

Learning about institutions

All conferences are to some degree reflections of the social context in which they take place (Rioch, 1979). They are not, and cannot be, isolated from society or culture. It is a major part of the opportunity for learning that the social complexity of the conference and its context is addressed. Over the years the design of the Institutional Event has changed, but usually to allow issues which are at any moment becoming prominent in society to be examined. But one problem which seems to be endemic among staff and members alike is how to sustain a sense of the conference “institution in the mind”. From the earliest days, as Rice reports, the pressure in this event has been to emphasize management:

In an intergroup exercise[6] the staff are in constant danger of imagining that they are managing an exercise for its own sake; that is, that they are managing a communication system, but not necessarily a learning process (Rice, 1965, p. 109).

Many managerial defences are raised. For instance, reports about what happened in a sector become confusing and extended, as if such data or information matter. This is not new. Rice commented:

Certainly as director of the exercise I often feel that I do not need to be told about members’ behaviour. I have only to observe staff behaviour. That epitomizes what is happening in the exercise (Rice, 1965, p. 111).

Questions about provision of resources tend to arise, as if the staff had falsely allocated them. The issue of communication (even more the bane of the modern conference than in the early days) nearly always becomes prominent, and above all the excessive definition of delegate status obscures the task.

This latter point is central to learning about leadership. At the opening of the Institutional Event the Director will usually discuss how authority is delegated to and assumed by an individual on behalf of his or her group or set of groups. It is suggested that authority is best thought of as lying on a continuum. At one end lies the minimal authorization of the observer, who may go and watch and listen, but not speak for his or her group. Towards the mid-point we find the status of delegate. This person is authorized to convey a group’s viewpoint and discuss it, but not to negotiate on its behalf. That role is

reserved for the other end of the spectrum, where we find the plenipotentiary. Representatives with this authority may use their own discretion to speak and act on behalf of their group. In terms of leadership we might say that only the last position constitutes any leadership, since by inference there have to be some followers – those who have delegated authority to someone not only to represent them but to act on their behalf.

All of these concerns may be part of the developing life of the conference as this emerges for study in the Institutional Event. But they are all also potential defences against learning. This manifests itself in the difficulty which members sometimes express over coming, as they often put it, “to the door” of the room where the staff is working. Part of this confusion may lie in the shorthand that is used. In the Institutional Event the staff becomes spoken of as “management”. This is correct: the staff collectively take responsibility for the boundary conditions that make the conference possible, especially time, territory and task. But this working concept frequently slides into the staff becoming “the management”. This is a notion which is largely made up of fantasies and projections. Yet when members come to “the management” that they are assuming it seems rarely as well interpreted as it might be. The term is initially accepted without it being perceived that this use tends to reify the idea of the institution into something which is being “managed” in a conventional sense. As a result the “institution in the mind” which is both the object of study and the point of major learning may become unnecessarily obscured. Yet precisely at this point leadership and management need distinguishing. Because of the dependence that is endemic in any institution, the staff are perceived as leaders – good, bad or indifferent. It is not a role that can be rejected; it can, like everything else, only be interpreted. Yet in the conference the leaders – those about whom fantasies are sustained – are also present as management of the organization that enables the institution do its work – especially task, time and territory.

The clue to understanding in this context lies in the staff being able to hear that the presenter is always “right” and their being able confidently to address this hearing. The member represents some image of the institution, the unconscious set of pictures that is constantly being renegotiated as the event runs. This is different from merely some facet of the organization. When the Institutional Event is simplified or treated too casually, the contemporary culture of management and organizations, which is basically about

getting things done, is unwittingly endorsed. As a result members and staff struggle around themes in what I can best describe as a “quasi-consciousness”. Projection and fantasy are identified and named but adequately working with them does not occur. As a result staff try to conform to the members’ expectations that they will somehow “manage” and so succeed only in confusing them. The theme of authority and its exercise may be intensely scrutinized. But the larger and more significant concept of an “institution in the mind” is lost and so the study of leadership is displaced.

Conclusion

Rice’s (1965) approach, as developed subsequently, remains a lively one for learning for leadership. It is less interested in theory (that would be to learn *about* leadership) than in discovering how to exercise leadership. The distinctive clue to this lies less in acquiring skills or techniques than in developing a basic, but under-used, human capacity, that of being able not only to listen but also to hear and respond. When that is perceived, some of the standard issues of leadership which perennially return may be differently addressed. For example, the relationship and relatedness between leader and followers, or the question of whether anyone who leads must possess some form of charisma are viewable from a new perspective. Learning through such conferences is an unusual experience. Many who have participated claim that for them it provided a unique opportunity to learn for leadership.

Notes

- 1 The references to the levels are inserted by me, not Howard.
- 2 There is a vast literature on this theme which originates in Bion (1961). Rice describes it thus: “A basic assumption is a tacit assumption; and members of a group behave as if they were aware of it, even though it is unconscious. Not only is participation in a basic assumption unavoidable, but it involves each member’s sharing in the emotions to which he contributes” (Rice, 1965, p. 12).
- 3 This is taken from the 1994 brochure for the Leicester Conference of which I was Director.
- 4 This distinction was not originally made. It represents a refinement of conference design.

- 5 If I were writing this now I would argue that we should be more careful about “organization” and “institution”. I would also reckon that “not often” is an understatement.
- 6 At this period there was no conceptual distinction between the Intergroup and Institutional Events.

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