

# How to Remain Balanced When Developing a New Kind of Leadership

**Dan Roger Sträng**

Østfold University College, Norway

**Dag Sørmo**

Østfold University College, Norway

In this paper we will discuss the process of creating and implementing an efficient dialogue between educational leaders and researchers in a collaborative relationship. The dialogue was originally intended to help the leaders find new and effective ways to improve their leadership through reflective practice. A way of doing this was implementing a mentoring leadership which eventually ended up with a frustrated staff and questions of how educational leaders can attach to a new kind of leadership without losing their identity. Reflective practice may lead to learning and growth for the whole organization, but changing an organizational culture is complex and challenging for those involved.

*Keywords:* collaborative dialogue, reflective practice, educational leadership

## Introduction

Organizations are always looking for ways to improve their performance in order to maintain a more competitive edge (Asplund and Blacksmith 2012). A popular way of improving is introducing new forms of leadership. In this chapter we will present a minor research project, focusing on the process of creating and implementing an efficient dialogue about reflective practice between a group of educational leaders and researchers in a collaborative research relationship (Fox and Faver 1984; Ley and Gentry 2000). The dialogue was originally based on mutual beliefs of the potential of reflective practice, independent of professional differences and individual standings. Collaborative working relationships help the sharing of successful practices and the provision of support (Fullan 1991; Hargreaves and Dawe 1990; Little 1990). Communication and joint work provide required pressure and support needed for getting things done.

In our dialogue we wanted to reconcile and challenge existing conditions at the educational leader's workplace, a cooper-

ative preschool. We expressed the importance of reflective practice by discussing and evaluating what to do and which changes that eventually could be made. Establishing reflective practice is, however, complex, because the participants have to reflect both on different aspects of daily work and their own cultural identity (Thorsen and DeVore 2013). Aware of this we tried to find an effective strategy for promoting reflection, irrespected of representation and authority in different contexts. In our dialogue we searched for themes that would reassure the educational leaders to explain and understand amendments of their daily work. As researchers with limited knowledge of educational leadership in preschool, we looked for useful approaches of compatible understanding (Sträng 1997) to attain excellence and flow in our research relationship. Csíkszentmihályi (1997) points out that flow is likely to occur when an individual is faced with a task that has some clear goals that require specific responses. Flow also may appear when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable, so it acts as a magnet for learning new skills and increasing challenges. If challenges are too big, one can return to the flow state by learning new skills. For an effective dialogue our collaborative research relationship had to be balanced and well-reasoned, involving all members in a respectable way.

### **Constructive Orientation**

Every complex system depends on clear communication. Communication skills allow leaders to perform their role more effectively, but worldwide surveys confirm that prospective and current employees do not always meet the expected standards of communication within the organization (Buhler and Worden 2013). Integrative communication is positive but will maybe not lead to improve the activities of the system. A challenge for leaders is the ability to create an effective dialogue about the need for constant change adaptation and flexibility, whilst remaining faithful to the overall goals and everyday planning. A way of facing this challenge is to develop leadership skills built on regular and purposeful reflective practice (Bell and Mladenovic 2013). In literature there is an agreement of reflective practice as a good measure of development, however there are different ideas of how this should be undertaken. Schön (1973) argues that social systems must learn to become capable of transforming themselves without an inap-

appropriate threat to the essential functions, but with steady focus on their ability to support the self-identity of those who belong to them. As defined by Schön (1983), reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice, while being mentored by professionals in the discipline.

Reflective practice has become a common term used to describe a variety of activities in order to transform an organization into a learning system. A general view is that reflective activities will not be successful if the participants do not view them as important enough to assimilate into their practice. Accordingly where reflective practice is being newly implemented it is important for leaders to ensure that consideration is given to how activities are received by staff and stakeholders (Ledvinka 2006; Burton and McNamara 2009). The organization must learn to create effect of the transformation and diffusion of the whole system (Schön 1973). With this in mind our dialogue over time focused on a constructive orientation, with the participants making their contributions solution more focused, future oriented and collaborative (Browning, Morris and Kee 2012).

### **Educational Leaders in Reflective Practice**

Educational leaders engage in reflective practice for distinct purposes. Among these are the wish to adjust their methods of leadership and finding better ways to understand and meet the needs of their staff and stakeholders. Within their sphere of influence on how to affect change and development, they can pursue areas of great impact and better communicate up, down and sideways (Gore and Zeichner 1991; LaBoskey 1994; Thorsen and DeVore 2013; 2013; Van Manen 1977). An important dimension of educational leadership can be understood as participating in everyday work-activities, rather than seen as distinct from these (Larsson and Lundholm 2010). Organizational learning requires strategies for making systematic analysis and reflection more likely throughout different levels of the organization. The leaders must learn to effect the transformation and diffusion of the system in applying knowledge to practice, while being mentored by professionals. Bascia and Hargreaves (2000) emphasises that traditional hierarchical notions of leadership will not succeed, because the understanding and commitment of everyone involved is fundamental to what happens, regardless of policies and plans. Reflective practice

as a communication process also means that organizational members will need increased dialogic skills (Levin and Riffel 2000).

The presumed impact of mentoring on organizational learning made us ask ourselves how our research dialogue could be designed to facilitate educational leaders implementing reflective practice as method for communication (Bell and Mladenovic 2013). Research indicates that time and opportunities to reflect and ensuring access to a mentor for continuing professional development are important steps for promoting reflective practice. The mentor will challenge the thinking of educational leaders and encourage them to look at things from multiple perspectives instead of repeating old standpoints and habits (Colmer 2008; Kinsella 2009). We believed that our relationship had the ability to engage the educational leaders in effective communication, emphatic listening, personal learning and self-reflection (Kram and Ragins 2007). Relational mentoring characterized of members influence and influenced by each other (Ragins 2005) was a possible move forward to reflective practice.

In a collaborative relationship the members will participate through available modes of relating. If the relationship is enough safe and interesting, mutual exchanges of new ideas may lead to new modes of relations and motivations for change. A high-quality mentoring relationship is the result of individual, relational and organizational factors (Hall and Las Heras 2012). We considered that the frequency and depth of mentoring episodes with reflecting teams would strengthen the relational trust and make for a high-quality work relationship (Pratt and Dirks 2007; Wieselquist et al. 1999).

### **The Start of Our Dialogue: CARIB**

Our relationship started with the educational leaders searching for new ways of developing their leadership and thus asked us, as experienced mentors, for assistance. As researchers we had a professional interest in the methodological challenge as an alternative to traditional leadership development and agreed to the suggested dialogue. The frame of a collaborative research relation was an opportunity to get a closer look on something new and exciting. Gjedde and Ingemann (2008) talk about the pre-reflexive experience, which has not reached the realm of conscious expression and might not even do so. To capture the complexity of experience and handle the experimental processes we had to design a suitable processual methodology. The outcome was a minor re-

search and development project ‘Culture Analysis and Reflective Processes in Preschool (CARIB),’ a play on words, born out of the Norwegian word for preschool, ‘Barnehage.’

We decided to use mentoring with reflective teams (Andersen 1991) as work tool, manifested by a series of internal mentoring episodes for the educational leaders. The idea of reflective teams was originally developed within the therapeutic field. The concept of reflective teams has spread from the original therapeutic context and is nowadays applied in a wider organizational context. Reflective teams have been a common method in connection with team mentoring and team appraisals (Hornstrup and Loehr-Petersen 2003). The implicit value of a reflective team is to provide new information. Andersen (1987) notices that reflective teams allow an increased exchange of pictures and explanations. By sharing their views, each participant receives different interpretations of reality. These differences will add new perspectives to each person’s picture, as an ecology of ideas. In this process all participants must respect that everyone has the right to remain the way that they are. This applies as well to the relationship between and within groups, where group members have to acknowledge other members need to retain their patterns as an autonomous system, with only themselves knowing how and when they are ready to change its structure.

In the project we were supposed to mentor the educational leaders, as well as develop the ongoing collaborative research dialogue. Andersen (1987) concludes that each new way might come from not being able to continue any longer in the same way, and being a participant is better than remaining an observer. This convinced us of the potential of our strategy, despite its complexity. Nonetheless we discovered rather soon that mentoring was not enough for the educational leaders to change their daily work in preschool. Skills and knowledge had to be distributed to all personnel. The emphasis was that staff needed mentoring from their leaders who consequently would have to mentor their staff. All personnel would thus benefit from leadership mentoring and supposedly learn mentoring skills for developing their own team and work more effectively (Tolhurst 2006).

To launch these extended activities we needed a clearer view of what was going on in preschool, from another perspective than the leaders. In order to get this knowledge we decided to begin our project with a culture analysis, according to the ‘scope for action’ school development strategy (Berg 2003) among all staff members.

## Cultural Analysis

The 'scope for action' strategy comprises identifying the salient features of a current culture of a given school, as well as the limits determined by policy documents regulating daily work. This enables those involved to discover the existing, but maybe not visible, scope for action within the prevalent culture. In the cultural analysis, the dialogic interaction progresses simultaneously on several levels, partly between texts in the form of letter statements and the concepts of the scope for action model. The existing cultural features are discovered by asking all staff members to write an open and free letter in which they express how they experience their daily life at school (Berg, Namdar and Sträng 2011). Generally the model can be seen as a dialogue within the text of letters by writers with similar voices (Sträng 2011).

This dialogue promotes a collective study of phenomena in everyday work life, in which different perspectives and aspects are being visualized. The varied contexts, frameworks and processes indicate that cultural analyses sometimes need to be balanced with a more thorough and detailed situation analysis. The purpose of the cultural analysis is not primarily to achieve a mutual understanding, but to maintain a broader understanding of everyday life from the individual's point of view. The facts and findings of the cultural analysis can lead to different understandings of what actually happens in daily work and give us important knowledge of the values and motivations among the individuals in the organization. The scope for action is defined by Berg (2003) as a strategic process, enclosing the relations between how the activities of school as both an organization and an institution imposes on schools daily work. Berg emphasizes that how the thoughts of a scope for action is received depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the individual school actors.

The use of cultural analysis as an analysis instrument from school research to examine daily life in preschool was somewhat questionable. We realised that we could end up off the edge, but we found the outspoken points of language and terminology as generally conservative influence on creative thinking. Gjedde and Ingemann (2008) express that in order to explore the hidden undertones when concepts are transplanted from one arena to another there is a need of an experimental methodology.

In the project we performed three rounds of cultural analyses among preschool staff. The results were perceptibly different. The initial analysis gave us a shattered impression of a preschool cul-

ture with opposite views of relations between leaders and staff. Some informants were saying that their leaders wanted everyone to be happy and took a motherly care of all staff members. Others were openly critical and mentioned that there was a big distance between the two groups. When we discussed the result with the educational leaders they were astonished and critical to the relevance of our analysis. This discussion was a crucial moment of our research relation, where our mutual understanding of a collaborative dialogue was threatened. One year later we launched a second round of letter writing. In most of these letters one could find proposals of critical but constructive ways of how to strengthen the relations between leaders and staff, in order to adopt the available scope for action. The previous dialectic polarity had almost vanished.

After participating in a series of mentoring sessions, the educational leaders were at last ready to mentor their personnel and continue the reflective processes that according to the letters obviously had started. We designed a model of reflecting groups to embrace a mentoring leadership as an outcome of our research dialogue. The first months with this 'new' kind of leadership were non-problematical, but occasionally things started to go wrong. Intensive mentoring from the educational leaders, aiming at reflection rather than traditional leadership brought to confusion and anger. Staff members experienced how their scope for action decreased whilst the distance between staff and leaders once again was increased. To examine this alarming tendency we decided to perform a third round of letter writing. This time the letters told us stories of an almost farcical leadership, without neither goals nor methods for developing. The overall wish of educational leaders as persons with abilities of exerting influence over others and inspire, motivate and direct their personnel to reach organizational goals was far away. The new mentoring leadership emerged all in all as a contra productive obstacle to prosperity and development in preschool.

### **Concluding Remarks**

A theme of our dialogue was how the educational leaders would confront the different views of their staff how their leadership should be maintained. We focused on leadership legacy as a way of increasing the relational and communicative skills among leaders and staff. We also had to increase our knowledge of cultural

understanding both in theory and practice. Our initial belief in the importance of reflective practice remained, but we noticed there were more difficulties of implementing a new leadership in a preschool culture than we had presumed there would be. Schein (2006) concludes that leadership and culture must be looked at collectively, neither can be understood by itself. Leaders must be conscious of culture, otherwise it will manage them. Cultural understanding is essential if leaders are to lead. In our project we discovered that the initial discourse of learning from experience was primarily transformed into learning about experience (Williams 2013).

Professional groups seldom have similar cultures, although the organizational culture as a whole can be a cohesive element. Developing staff and leaders from a cultural perspective can be hazardous activities. Schein (2006) tell us that attempts to change organizational culture from the inside can be harmful, especially in a context where cultural aspects are taken for granted. Emotional investments make people defensive or aggressive. In our project we also found that the factors of structure and function across the differing cultures of staff members were specular to executive stress and the moral dilemmas among the leaders (Hodgkinson 1996). In our dialogue we proceeded from a holistic view on staff and leaders in preschool, not as isolated parts, but as members of the same organizational context. A closer look on the real interplay between formal steering and informal influences would likely have given us a deeper cultural understanding (Sträng 2011).

After the latest round of letters our dialogue turned into a discussion of how educational leaders can attach to a mentoring leadership without losing their identity as leaders. Sundström, De Meuse, and Futrell (1990) argue that when boundaries become too loose, teams get overwhelmed and might even lose their identity. Movement across boundaries and traditions create challenges as the need to redefine one's identity. A particular problem is when one's skills become less relevant or salient to the actual needs of collaboration (Dibble and Gibson 2012). In recent years there has been a growing understanding of the importance of the relationship between the leader and follower (Kark 2012). The focuses on relationships in leadership theories have become more explicit. Tolhurst (2006) speaks of a distributed leadership structure, where more staff will be taking on a leadership role.

In our collaborative dialogue we had designed and implemented a strategy of leader education and development, including cultural analysis and mentoring of leaders and staff. The outcome



was undoubtedly an increased reflectiveness among the participants, but also an increasing malaise and disturbance. We knew in advance that changes of cultures require a major investment of time and resources. A challenge for all embedded in a certain culture is to recognize the self-constructed parts and what is taken for granted.

In the end of the project we tried to define the reality of implementing mentoring leadership in preschool. According to Tolhurst (2006) we had succeeded in involving all staff from the beginning and how to investigate their knowledge of mentoring in organizations. At the same time we had failed to properly explain the aim of our project to all actors. Within our dialogue we had also failed in creating a shared definition of mentoring.

Developing leadership is a question of reciprocity, including the important obligation of sharing knowledge. In our dialogue we did share knowledge and experience, but we failed to create a mutual understanding of the complex process of change. Fullan (2004) says that if knowledge is not mutually shared, it will not be adequately developed and thus not fully available to the organization. In spite of our failings we ended up with a continuing will to create an adequate strategy for mentoring leadership. We did not primarily search for an expandable scope for action (Berg 2003), only how to find and create new ways of including all staff members in a collaborative dialogue. The use of reflecting teams helped us with the possible dilemma of both-and and neither-nor (Andersen 1987).

The educational leaders are once again located in a culture of change, facing all its challenges. A possible clue to success is the establishment of a more mutual, collaborative and fluid relationship between the leader and follower (Fletcher 2007; Kark 2012). According to Fletcher (2007) relational leaderships may result in outcomes of positive learning and growth for the people involved, as well as the organization. Research on reflective practice has shown that effective practice is connected to critical thinking and reflection that is beneficial for professional development (Blaik Hourani 2013).

An important question both for us and the educational leaders is how to remain balanced when developing a new kind of leadership? To answer this question we wish to continue our dialogue, this time focusing on how to create and re-establish the organizational balance that was interrupted, while we were all occupied by implementing mentoring leadership as reflective practice in preschool.

## References

- Andersen, T. 1987. 'The Reflecting Team: Dialogue and Meta-Dialogue in Clinical Work.' *Fam Proc* 26:415–428.
- Andersen, T. 1991. *The Reflecting Team: Dialogues and Dialogues About the Dialogues*. New York: Norton and Company.
- Asplund, J., and N. Blacksmith. 2012. 'Productivity Through Strengths.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, edited by K. S. Cameron and G. M. Spreitzer, 353–365. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bascia, N., and A. Hargreaves. 2000. 'Teaching and Leading on the Sharp Edge of Change.' In *The Sharp Edge of Educational Change: Teaching, Leading and the Realities of Reform*, edited by N. Bascia and A. Hargreaves, 3–26. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bell, A., and R. Mladenovic. 2013. 'How Tutors Understand and Engage with Reflective Practices.' *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* 14 (1): 1–11.
- Berg, G. 2003. *Att förstå skolan: en teori om skolan som institution och skolor som organisationer*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Berg, G., K. Namdar, and R. Sträng. 2011. 'From School Development to Urban Community Development.' In *Does Leadership matter? Implications for Leadership Development and the School as a Learning Organisation*, edited by T. Baráth and M. Szabó, 312–314. Budapest and Szeged: HUNSEM, University of Szeged.
- Blaik Hourani, R. 2013. 'Pre-Service Teachers' Reflection: Perception, Preparedness and Challenges.' *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* 14 (1): 12–30.
- Browning, L., G. H. Morris, and K. F. Kee. 2012. 'The Role of Communication in Positive Organizational Scholarship.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, edited by K. S. Cameron and G. M. Spreitzer, 566–578. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Buhler, P. M., and J. D. Worden. 2013. *Up Down and Sideways: High-Impact Verbal Communication for HR Professionals*. Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management.
- Burton, K., and J. McNamara. 'Assessing Reflection Skills in Law Using Criterion-Referenced Assessment.' *Legal Education Review* 19 (1–2): 171–188.
- Colmer, K. 2008. 'Leading a Learning Organization: Australian Early Years Centres as Learning Networks.' *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 16 (1): 107–115.
- Csikszentmihaly, M. 1997. *The psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Dibble, R., and C. B. Gibson. 2012. 'Margins, Membership, and Mobility: Redefining Boundaries in Collaborative Endeavors.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, edited by K. S. Cameron and G. M. Spreitzer, 715–724. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Fletcher, J. K. 2007. 'Leadership, Power, and Positive Relationships.' In *Exploring Positive Relationships at Work: Building a Theoretical and Research Foundation*, edited by J. E. Dutton and B. R. Ragins, 347–371. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fox, M. F., and C. A. Faver. 1984. 'Independence and Cooperation in Research: The Motivations and Costs of Collaboration.' *The Journal of Higher Education* 55 (5): 347–359.
- Fullan, M. 1991. *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. London: Cassell.
- Fullan, M. 2004. *Leading in a Culture of Change: Personal Action Guide and Workbook*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gjedde, L., and B. Ingemann. 2008. *Researching Experiences: Exploring Processual and Experimental Method in Cultural Analysis*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.
- Gore, J. M., and K. Zeichner. 1991. 'Action Research and Reflective Thinking in Preservice Teachers Education: A Case Study from the United States.' *Teaching and Teacher Education* 2:119–136.
- Hall, D. T., and M. Las Heras. 2012. 'Personal Growth Through Career Work: A Positive Approach to Careers.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, edited by K. S. Cameron and G. M. Spreitzer, 507–518. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hargreaves, A., and R. Dawe. 'Paths of Professional Development: Contrived Collegiality, Collaborative Culture, and the Case of Peer Coaching.' *Teacher and Teacher Education* 6 (3): 227–241.
- Hodgkinson, C. 1996. *Administrative Philosophy. Values and Motivations in Administrative Life*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Hornstrup, C., and J. Loehr-Petersen. 2003. *Appreciative Inquiry: en konstruktiv metode til positive forandringer*. Copenhagen: DJOEF.
- Kark, R. 2012. 'Workplace Intimacy in Leader-Follower Relationships.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, edited by K. S. Cameron and G. M. Spreitzer. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kinsella, E. 2009. 'Professional Knowledge and the Epistemology of Reflective Practice.' *Nursing Philosophy* 11 (1): 3–14.
- Kram, K. E., and B. R. Ragins. 2007. 'The Landscape of Mentoring in the 21 Century.' In *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research and Practice*, edited by B. R. Ragins and K. E. Kram, 659–692. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- LaBoskey, V. K. 1994. *Development of Reflective Practice: A Study of Preservice Teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Larsson, M., and S. E. Lundholm. 2010. 'Leadership as Work-Embedded Influence: A Micro-Discursive Analysis of an Everyday Interaction in a Bank.' *Leadership* 6 (2): 159–184.
- Ledvinka, G. 2006. 'Reflection and Assessment in Clinical Legal Education: Do You See What I See?' *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 9:29–56.

- Levin, B., and A. Riffel. 2000. 'Changing Schools in a Changing World.' In *The Sharp Edge of Educational Change: Teaching, Leading and the Realities of Reform*, edited by A. Bascia and A. Hargreaves, 178–194. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ley, C. J., and D. B. Gentry. 2000. 'The American Family: Change and Diversity: A Course with Opportunities for Reflective Human Action.' *Diverse Families: A Dialogue about Reflective Practice* 12 (2). <http://www.kon.org/archives/forum/12-2/ley.html>
- Little, J. W. 1990. 'The "Mentor" Phenomenon and the Social Organization of Teaching.' *Review of Research in Education* 16:297–351.
- Pratt, M. G., and K. T. Dirks. 2007. 'Rebuilding Trust and Restoring Positive Relationships: A Commitment-Based View of Trust.' In *Exploring Positive Relationships at Work: Building a Theoretical and Research Foundation*, edited by J. Dutton and B. R. Ragins, 117–156. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ragins, B. R. 2000. 'Towards a Theory of Relational Mentoring.' Unpublished manuscript.
- Schein, E. 2006. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. New York: Wiley.
- Schön, D. 1973. *Beyond the Stable State: Public and Private Learning in a Changing Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Schön, D. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sträng, R. 1997. *Kunskapsproduktion, kunskapsväxt och pedagogiska motorvägar: Wittgenstein, Lundgren och Berg*. Örebro: Skolledarhögskolan.
- Sträng, R. 2011. *Polyphonic Reanalysis of School Cultures: A Study on School Stakeholders' Goals and Values in Their Daily Work*. Karlstad: Karlstads universitet.
- Sundström, E., K. P. De Meuse, and D. Futrell. 'Work Teams: Applications and Effectiveness.' *The American Psychologist* 45 (2): 120–135.
- Thorsen, C. A., and S. DeVore. 2013. 'Analyzing Reflection on/for Action: A New Approach.' *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* 14 (1): 88–103.
- Tolhurst, J. 2006. *Coaching for Schools: A Practical Guide to Building Leadership Capacity*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Van Manen, M. 1977. 'Linking Ways of Knowing with Ways of Being Practical.' *Curriculum Inquiry* 6 (3): 205–228.
- Wieselquist, J., C. E. Rusbult, C. A. Foster, and C. R. Agnew. 1999. 'Commitment, Pro-Relationship Behavior, and Trust in Close Relationships.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (5): 942–966.
- Williams, A. 2013. 'Critical Reflective Practice: Exploring a Reflective Group Forum through the Use of Bion's Theory of Group Processes.' *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* 14 (1): 75–87.