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Creating New Languages for Leadership Across Boundaries; Working in the
Era of "Swamp Problems"

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Introduction

In a world of increasingly complex problems that cannot be addressed through established paradigms, it has become essential for leaders to enlist a wide range of expertise and perspectives. Thus, leadership becomes an act of translation. But even in a group with a shared culture, let alone groups with diverse cultures (and here we mean "culture" in a broad sense: ethnic, religious, professional, or even policy orientation) translation is difficult.

This workshop demonstrated a text-based method for facilitating conversation in groups that are having trouble, or are stuck, in unhelpful ways of dealing with problems. These difficulties occur primarily when either the framing of the problem and/or proposed solutions are hard to discuss due to absence of a language wide enough to meaningfully include the diverse and seemingly incompatible approaches taken by "stakeholders."

Using a text from an unfamiliar "wisdom tradition" - whether religious, from a different time period or a different cultural context - allows participants to free themselves from any need to give a historically accurate reading of the text, and thus to engage with one another as they struggle to interpret the text. This process happens through the development of a "third language." As they realize that the text does not "speak" their language, they begin to search their own native languages (and we refer here to the language of their particular culture or discipline) for terms that will be helpful in articulating their understanding of what they are reading. The shuttling back and forth between the language of the text, and the languages of

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the readers, eventually yields a "third language" that allows for unexpected connections between readers from different perspectives.

While only one version of this method was demonstrated at the workshop, other versions and applications are also worth mentioning and were part of the discussion that followed the demonstration.

- The Socratic seminar method, associated with Mortimer Adler, is particularly designed to use textual inquiry to help participants go outside the norms of their particular culture.
- One presenter was developing the text method for use in facilitating dialogue among environmentalists and business people and brought that experience to the discussion. He had found that through the common endeavor of mutually respectful discussion, people can build relationships by working out a multiplicity of legitimate readings for a text.

The Workshop

We opened the workshop by introducing ourselves, our backgrounds and the theory behind the methods. It is important for participants to be aware of the professional or disciplinary background the workshop facilitators and participants bring to the process.

We then facilitated a session using the Talmudic text below as an example of one way to employ the method, followed by a discussion which compared and contrasted two other contexts in which the method could be employed.

I. Participants were given the following instructions before reading this text:

- Don't assume you need any prior knowledge beyond the context that is being provided
- Work in groups of two or three. As you read the text, please think about what leadership issues the text suggests.

Seven days before the Day of Atonement [Yom Kippur] they set the high priest apart from his house [by moving him] into the counselors' chamber. And they also make ready/appoint another priest as a substitute for him, [just] in case something happens to him that invalidates him [for performing the Temple service for the Day of Atonement]. Rabbi Judah says, "They should also make ready/appoint another woman as a substitute for his wife [Why?], [just] in case his wife dies. [How so?] Because it says in the [biblical] book of Leviticus, and he shall make atonement for himself and for his house. [The words] 'his house' refer to his wife." They said [back] to him, "If so, there is no end to the matter."

Note: Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the person serving as the highest [or greatest] of the Temple priests would enter the most holy place in the Temple in Jerusalem. On the same day, at other locations, he would perform additional religious rites unique to the Day of Atonement. All of these actions were believed to atone for [or expiate] the sins of the Israelite/Jewish people and reconcile them as a people to their God.

From the Talmud [Yoma 1:1]

Translation and note by Tsvi Blanchard

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II. Participants returned to the group and shared their ideas about the possible meanings of the text. They also discussed how they felt as they did this exercise. They were asked to speculate about why we chose this particular text as well as offer any ideas they had about what might be at stake in choosing a text for discussion. (In a longer exercise, participants might reflect on what they could learn from this experience about how leadership works in organizations.) Finally, participants were asked to suggest the situations in which using this method might be effective and why. They were encouraged to discuss how they might use this method. **See the list of answers participants gave below.**

III. Two other examples of text method were presented but not demonstrated. We then compared and contrasted the three methods. The two other methods were:

- The use of the Socratic seminar in cross-cultural settings.
- A seminar in which biblical texts about the creation story were used as a mediation tool with participants who have opposing viewpoints on environmental issues.

IV. Finally, participants discussed the theoretical issues that the methods raised. Why and/or how do they work? How does language and dialogue work across cultures? Where were there examples [or perhaps only hints] of a "third language"?

Participant answers

Question # 1: *What leadership issues did the text suggest? What leadership issues did you see in this text?*

Participants suggested:

1. How are leaders keepers of tradition?
2. How do leaders function as symbols of the community?
3. How do leaders function as representatives of a community?
4. How do leaders function as symbols of their kinship, family or other group?
5. How do leaders function as representatives of their kinship, family or other group?
6. What is the scope of leadership responsibility? For/to self? For/to family? For/to ones people or nation?
7. How important for formal or informal leadership are communal and/or group recognition?
8. How important for formal and informal leadership is the holding of a recognized position?
9. How do the tasks assigned to a leader by the group or community affect formal and informal leadership?
10. What makes a leader's actions valid? Invalid?
11. How does leadership create constraints on the private life of a leader?
12. How do personality types play out in leadership situations?
13. How is succession assured?
14. Is succession mostly about filling a position? Filling a role?
15. How fixed or controlled is the succession process?
16. How do leaders and their groups prepare for and/or cope with contingencies?
17. How does the exercise of leadership relate to the identity [of a leader, group member]?
18. How are the boundaries of self affected by the exercise of leadership?
19. How are visible and invisible leadership connected?

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20. How, when and why does the exercise of leadership separate the leader from others?
21. How are qualifications for performing leadership tasks set and monitored?
22. How does gender function in leadership positions?
23. How are leaders developed?

Question #2: *Where could we use this method?*

1. Diversity workshops/cross cultural conversations
2. Leadership development
3. Mediation
4. Conflict management
5. Restructuring organizations
6. Creating organizational structures
7. Building group relationships
8. Problem solving

Commonly Asked Questions and Some Possible Answers

Question 1: Why do you think the method that uses traditional texts works?

Answer: Frankly, we are not sure. More research needs to be done. Here are some of the best hypotheses we now have.

A. Groups that are stuck need to get beyond their assumptions about what the problem is and what they can do to solve it. The open-ended analysis of these unfamiliar texts creates a mind-set that moves away from the expected toward the unexpected. Participants engage creatively with the text materials while at the same time connecting to the general area of concern. This open, creative mind set allows them to imagine new ways of framing their problem and responding to it.

B. The text method engages group members with one another in an activity that is very different from the unproductive discussions that they have been having. Existing relationships may have been confrontational or at least argumentative. Working together on the text breaks that pattern and opens the possibility of "starting over again" with more cooperative relationships.

C. Different cultural groups will frame and respond to particular challenges using in their own particular languages; these languages include the connotations of many of the key words used in defining the problem and its possible solutions. As members of different groups work together to create a "third language," some of the restrictions imposed by their separate languages are eliminated and participants create shared uses for terms that previously had partially conflicting meanings. Groups make progress when they can use a common language.

D. Finally, the text reading and discussion method involves interpretation by association. Associative thought has fewer regulating/limiting rules than the discursive, logical reasoning that participants have been using. This means that, as in brainstorming, participants are more likely to imagine and express new possibilities. It also means that their common language has more "fuzzy" terms, allowing for many different possible "meanings". As a result, an increased set of options emerges.

Question 2: What kinds of texts work best?

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Answer: Again, it depends on the specifics of the situation. Here are some of the relevant factors that we consider when selecting a text.

A. The more possible meanings/readings that the text suggests, the better the chance that new possibilities will emerge. Thus texts containing ambiguous terms or that are explicitly multi-vocal, such as the Talmudic text above, are preferable.

B. The method has been successful when texts are used with which participants are likely to be unfamiliar. This makes it easier for them to follow the instructions and not revert to trying to provide an academically rigorous "correct" meaning for the text. If the text is of a familiar type, we can get results by asking participants to approach the text as if it were a very different kind of literature. For example, asking participants to turn brief extracts from legal texts into poems has been very effective. If a text is well-known or of a familiar type, participants should be instructed to reflect on how their particular attitudes, dispositions and experiences shape their reading of the text, illustrating the inherent multiplicity of the text's meanings. For example, when using the Genesis creation texts with a group of business people and environmentalists, participants were asked to reflect on how their professional interests and/or political perspectives influence the way in which they read the text and, conversely, the ways in which the text challenged these interests and perspectives. This exercise revealed the diverse ways in which a text could be understood by readers with different personal attitudes.

C. Note that when using the method of the Socratic seminar, the text selection criteria are similar. The best texts for seminars are those rich in issues, ideas, and values. Since ambiguity about issues, ideas, and values characterizes most social issues, texts that surface these ambiguities serve better than those that are narrow or one-sided.

D. There are no firm rules of thumb for choosing the content of texts. Sometimes working with texts that are directly connected to the issues under discussion has worked. Other times, and in general, texts with an indirect connection to the problem at hand will work better.

Question 3: Can this method be used with large groups?

Answer: Although groups larger than 40 are not particularly recommended, the text reading/discussion method has been used with large groups in a town hall meeting. But, whatever the group size, the actual reading-interpretation process should be done in break-out groups no larger than four.

Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard is the Director of Organizational Development at CLAL. In addition to his Rabbinic Ordination [orthodox], he holds Ph.D.s in Psychology and Philosophy. Tsvi has been a professor of philosophy, the director of the Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago and a practicing clinical and organizational psychologist. He has taught at Washington, Northwestern and Loyola Universities, as well as at the Drisha Institute for Women, the Jewish Theological Seminary Lehrhaus and the Wexner Heritage Foundation. Tsvi has appeared on several television programs including Fox TV's Eye On Religion and The Oprah Winfrey Show. In addition to his work in philosophy, social theory and Jewish texts, Rabbi Blanchard's stories and parables have been widely anthologized. His recent publications include "How Stories Heal" and "After Eden: The Search for the Holy in a Consumer Society."

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thinking about the social, political, cultural and technological trends affecting ethnic, religious and other forms of identity and community building. She is also working on developing creative methods for fostering productive conversations across ideological, professional and other cultural divides. She received a B.A. from Cornell University in Soviet Studies and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Cohen was an assistant professor in the Political Science Department at Wellesley College, where she taught courses on Russian and East European politics, international relations and nationalism. She is the author of Politics Without a Past: The Absence of History in Postcommunist Nationalism, on the problems of constructing new societies in the post-communist ideological vacuum (Duke University Press, 1999). Dr. Cohen is the winner of many academic fellowships, including the Social Science Research Council Graduate Training Fellowship, the American Council for Learned Societies dissertation fellowship and the Center for the Study of World Politics fellowship. She has extensive experience in the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where she designed and conducted a major research project and served as lecturer for tour groups.

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