Generative leadership

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In recent years, a growing chorus has raised concerns that conventional ideas about leadership are not adequate for responding to today's complex organizational challenges. The notion that good leadership astutely analyzes a problematic situation and provides a vision that shows the way to success doesn't work in complex situations. This article offers a different image of leadership that has proven effective for managing conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity, and volatility: "generative leadership." A description of when conventional modes of leadership (in complicated situations) and generative leadership (in complex situations) are most appropriate is followed by some behaviours and perspectives that characterize generative leadership. The article concludes with some thoughts on generative leadership in health care and some of the challenges leaders face in leading generatively.

KEY WORDS: generative leadership, generative change, dialogic organization development, complexity, visionary leadership, health care

The difference between complicated and complex

The right kind of leadership depends on the kind of challenges leaders face. Heifetz[1] was one of the first to provide a taxonomy of decision situations that contrasted complicated "technical problems" with complex "adaptive challenges" (see Table 1[2]), arguing that the single most common failure of leadership was to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems. Snowden and Boone[3] offer a different but complementary model focused on the ability of decision-makers to understand or uncover cause–effect relations.

Complicated decision situations are those where the application of technical expertise can uncover cause–effect relations. In complex decision situations, however, there are too many interdependent and unpredictable variables, so that cause–effect relations are only understandable in retrospect. Some argue that any decision situation that requires

Table 1. Characteristics of technical problems and adaptive challenges[2]

Technical problems	Adaptive challenges
Easy to define operationally.	Difficult to agree on what the "problem" is.
Lend themselves to operational (process and procedures) solutions.	Require changes in values, beliefs, relationships, and mindsets.
People are generally receptive to technical solutions they understand.	People generally resist adopting other-defined values and beliefs.
Often can be solved by authorities or experts.	The stakeholders have to be involved in solving.
Require change in just one or a few places, often contained within organizational boundaries.	Require change in numerous places, usually across organizational boundaries.
Solutions can often be implemented relatively quickly by changing rules or work processes.	Adaptation requires experiments and new discoveries as well as wrong turns and dead ends.
Stay solved until something else changes.	Adaptation creates new problems that will have to be adapted to.

the consent of human agents is a complex one.[4,5] They argue that people are not simple stimulus–response organisms, but rather they interpret and make sense of their experience in idiosyncratic ways; how decisions, plans, and proposal's will be interpreted and acted on is never fully predictable.

The problem with conventional images of visionary leadership

Pick up any book or article on leadership and chances are pretty high that "vision" will be a central defining characteristic. The popular distinction between transformational and transactional leadership rests on this notion that real leaders can see a solution, or a preferred future, and can articulate this in a way that captures followership. This includes the expectation that leaders provide "winning" goals, targets, and strategies that others can steer by.

Although the business press and leadership texts laud the visionary attributes of founders of highly successful companies, they tend to ignore the high percentage of failed visions. Nor is there much recognition of the increasingly complex and even chaotic situations leaders face and for which there are no clear solutions or even solution paths. Studies of actual strategy implementation and of companies that succeed in complex, fast-changing environments find that those that followed a singular vision provided by "charismatic" leaders tended to fail.[6]

So then, what works?

The argument proposed here, consistent with a variety of studies over the past decade,[2] is that in complicated situations, conventional top-down, planned change approaches to leadership and decision-making are appropriate. When effective, state-of-the-art solutions to problems exist, or when cause–effect relations can be analyzed and understood, then applying technical expertise, identifying best practices, and implementing them using change management approaches can work, given the usual caveats about the need to manage structural, political, and cultural issues during implementation.

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In complex situations, however, a different, *generative change* approach is appropriate.[7] Essentially, generative change requires identifying the issue or problem that needs to be addressed and framing it in a way that will motivate the variety of stakeholders who are "part of the problem" to engage in coming up with new ideas. They are invited into conversations intended to stimulate many self-initiated, fail-safe innovations and see what works. Those innovations that do work are then nurtured and scaled up. As opposed to a top-down, identify and then implement the best solution strategy, this is a top-down-bottom-up, learn as you go strategy.[2]
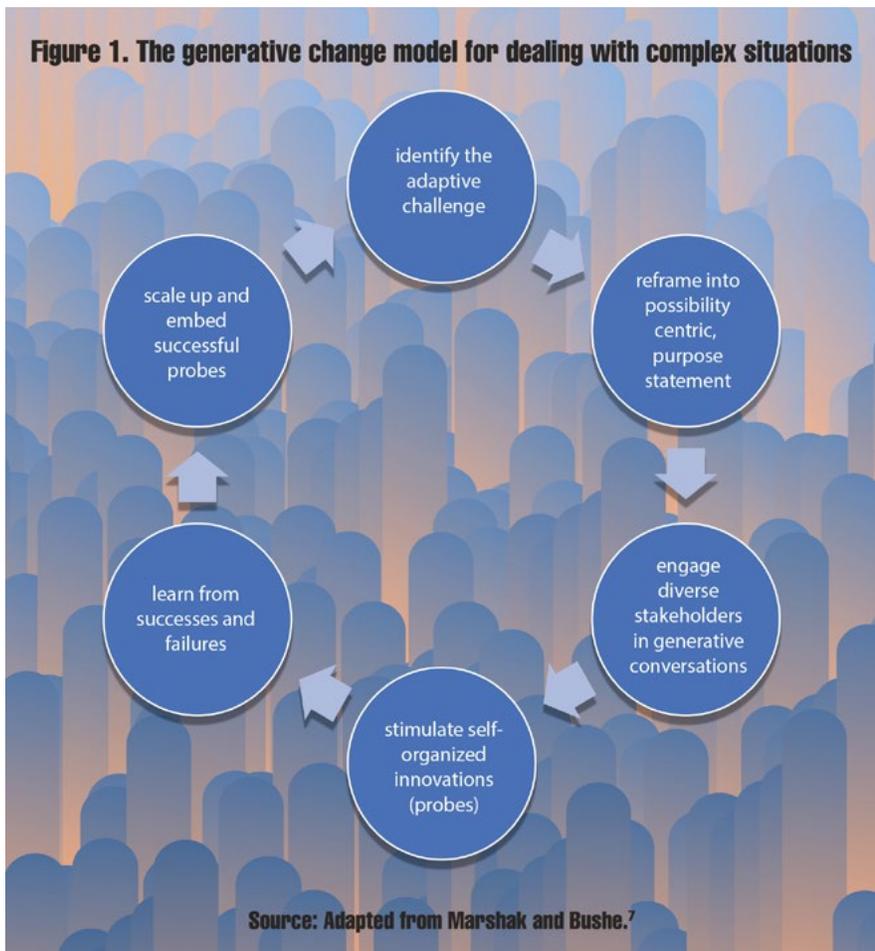
Actions of successful generative leadership

Rather than saying "I know the answer, follow me," generative leaders say, "I know the challenge, and I invite you to decide what you will do about it." To do this successfully requires identifying not a problem, but a "purpose" that captures something the stakeholders, who ultimately have to act to successfully address the challenge, care about.

A vision identifies, in concrete terms, a future state. A purpose identifies what the group or organization is trying to do every day and often is not something that will ever be fully realized. For example, a vision might be to have 10 needle exchange clinics operating throughout a city, whereas a purpose might be to eliminate AIDS. Generative leadership reframes issues and goals into compelling purposes that capture stakeholder attention and motivate them to initiate innovative actions.

One or more conversations are hosted,[8] where the key stakeholders are invited to discuss the issues, self-organize into groups that have a common set of interests and motivations, and design, proto-type, or otherwise come up with ideas they are willing to act on. There is no attempt by leaders to "pick winners"; people are asked to just go do it. An environment of creative possibility is established, with the expectation that not all innovations

Figure 1. The generative change model for dealing with complex situations

identify the adaptive challenge

reframe into possibility centric, purpose statement

engage diverse stakeholders in generative conversations

stimulate self-organized innovations (probes)

learn from successes and failures

scale up and embed successful probes

Source: Adapted from Marshak and Bushe.[7]

will succeed. An important role of generative leadership is to closely track what takes place after these conversations and events, support promising initiatives, remove barriers, spread what is being learned by both successes and failures, and scale up and embed successful innovations (Figure 1).

Here is an example of a generative change process: the chief operating officer of a fast-growing health care organization serving a global customer base of patients with a range of difficult-to-address diseases and afflictions was concerned about growing problems with poor patient outcomes resulting from hospital errors. She was well aware of the need to think and act systemically to improve patient safety, but there were already plenty of behavioural guidelines in place.

She believed the crux of the problem was relationships among the care providers. It was how doctors, nurses, and others interacted and communicated that caused the breakdowns that jeopardized care. The medically trained members of the organization were vertically siloed by their specialties and agreed on very little other than that their specialty needed more money. What patients wanted and needed varied by the nature of their medical condition, compounded by different health care practices and cultures in the global communities the organization

sought to serve.

There were also technological and medical innovations coming down the road that needed to be considered, such as the greater use of AI and robots. Unfortunately, the complexity of the situation, the wide range of perspectives, and a lack of agreed upon criteria was compounded by the lack of clear agreement on any system-wide changes that might be needed to reduce errors. Attempts to raise the issue tended to result in different groups blaming each other and/or attributing the problems to growth and hiring the wrong people.

Looking for a way to capture the inherent motivation of all the people in the organization that would improve relations across different groups and ultimately result in reduced errors, the COO challenged everyone to propose new initiatives to "improve our ability to enhance the quality of life of all we serve and touch." A series of "dialogic organization development" events brought together highly diverse groups of people from inside and outside the organization. Some were as short as 90 minutes, a few lasted two days. Each was part of an attempt to launch experiments that people were personally committed to.

Surprising things emerged. For example, at a one-day workshop, after examining the strengths and weaknesses of familiar ways of talking about the organization, its mission, and challenges, one of the participants proposed, "We have to be more like an aqueduct.

Strong vertical pillars supporting lateral channels of life giving substance that flow from us to the people and communities we serve." The participant then drew a rough diagram of an aqueduct.

Somehow this "generative image" captured something new and exciting in the participants who began to discuss how their parts of the organization could be more like an aqueduct. Small groups were encouraged to self-organize around some aspect of the organization they wanted to change to be more like an aqueduct. One of these groups was composed of different parts of the cardiac unit, and they developed improved communication and coordination (the life-giving flow) processes. More important, they developed a shared commitment to working together that reduced cardiac errors 50% within 6 months.

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Generative leadership is enhanced by the use of generative images, a combination of words that can create new conversations and stimulate people to discuss and imagine things they weren't able to before.[9] A highly generative image is compelling; people want to talk about it and act on it. "Sustainable development" is the iconic generative image of our time, a combination of words that transformed the conversation

about "environmentalism" when it was first coined, and continues more than 25 years later to catalyze innovative ideas and actions.

Important qualities of a generative image are that it hasn't been discussed before, no one is sure how to do it, but it seems like an attractive notion. It is the ambiguity that allows for innovations to emerge and the attractiveness that compels people to act on them. Few generative images have the widespread appeal of sustainable development; most, like "be an aqueduct" are only generative in the contexts in which they are used.

There are a variety of methods for hosting conversations and for architecting a sequence of conversations to take on complex, adaptive challenges, documented and described in the field of dialogic organization development.[10] However, as Bob Marshak and I[11] have emphasized, the success of these methods depends more on the mindset of the leaders and change agents using them, than on the methods themselves.

The mindset for generative leadership

Generative leadership is not a description of a person, but a style of leading that works in specific situations. A single leader could (and probably should) use different leadership approaches in different situations. To use a generative leadership style successfully requires ways of

thinking or a mindset that includes several key assumptions about organizations and the processes of organizing, which are described briefly below.[11]

Organizations are social networks of meaning-making that create the realities people experience and react to.
Generative leadership assumes people are sense-making beings who operate on the interpretations they develop about what things mean.[12] Often, these arise out of the informal interactions people have with their networks of trusted others with whom they talk to make sense of what others are doing and saying.[13] Different groups in the organization can develop very different perspectives, assumptions, and narratives that guide their thoughts and actions. Generative leadership is sensitive to the ways in which organizations are streams of conversations and cognizant that resolving complex problems requires changing the conversations that normally take place and the narratives people hold.[14,15]

Groups and organizations are continuously self-organizing and recreating themselves, but disruption of repetitive and limiting patterns is required for adaptation to complex problems.
Generative leadership assumes that patterns of organizing are created, maintained, and changed through the day-to-day conversations people have in ways that are mostly out of awareness.[16] A change in those patterns requires them to be disrupted in some way, and

generative leadership recognizes disruption as an opportunity for new, more adaptive patterns to emerge.[17] This is in stark contrast to conventional managerial mindsets that see disruption as a failure of leadership. Disruption does not have to be conflictual or scary (although it sometimes is). Inspiration can be just as disruptive as fear. In general, enough disruption has occurred when the people involved believe that the way things have been no longer works and they can't go back.

When problems are too complex for anyone to analyze all the variables and know the correct answer in advance, the best approach is to use generative change processes to develop adaptive ideas and solutions. Generative leadership operates, implicitly or explicitly, from a "generative change" model.[7] Table 2 contrasts conventional planned change with generative change. Rather than attempt to deal with complex situations with a planned change approach, generative leaders use an emergent, more bottom-up approach that incorporates insights from complexity science.[18,19] Emergence is nature's way of changing, in which order arises out of disorder, and increasingly complex organization comes out of disruptions to existing order. Using any of the dozens of dialogic organization development methods available,[20] or just their intuition, leaders lead a process that stimulates stakeholders to self-organize and initiate action, then monitor and embed the most promising initiatives.[21]

Table 2. Contrasting planned change with generative change

Aspects	Planned change	Generative change
Approach	Social engineering: Identify problem and desired change, analyze required interventions, direct implementation.	Social innovation: Identify desired outcome/purpose, engage stakeholders in ways to stimulate innovative possibilities, motivate and support stakeholders to innovate.
Use when	State of the art approaches and solutions exist. Leadership believes it has enough clarity about the situation to sanction a planned change effort.	Beyond state-of-the-art approaches and solutions are needed. Leadership is uncertain about how to achieve agreement or specify solutions for the desired state.
Methods	Scientific and engineering oriented • Analyze data • Problem-solving approaches	Social interaction (dialogic) and social agreement oriented • Focus on desired futures • Possibility-inducing approaches
Change through	Convergence on a solution and effective top-down implementation. Sense — analyze — respond.	Generate many possible innovations and effective top-down/bottom-up improvisation. Experiment — learn — amplify.
Desired outcomes	Acceptance and implementation of changes that address problem(s) or achieve desired results as quickly as feasible.	Self-organizing adaptive actions and/or transformations that can be scaled up and embedded in timely ways.
Role of leaders	Performance oriented and directive; front-loaded effort. Provide *vision* of desired future state. Provide resources and clear roles and goals. Provide/resource tools and techniques that will diagnose the real issues and provide practical solutions. Accept or reject proposed solutions and direct others to implement.	Possibility oriented and supportive; back-end-loaded effort. Name the *purpose* that motivates stakeholders. Provide resources and clear boundaries. Provide/resource opportunities to strengthen the relationships and communications that will stimulate the emergence of adaptive actions that people will self-implement. Support, scale up, and embed most promising innovations.

Any solution to a problem of organizing will inevitably create a new problem; so, instead of trying to find the "right" answer to how best to organize, accept any answer that stakeholders will run with. Managing adaptive challenges is a never-ending process, and increasing the adaptive capacity of the team, organization, or larger network, while tackling a specific complex issue, is an important objective.
No model of organizing will ever be right for every organization, nor can any organization perpetuate itself without evolving its model

of organizing. Human beings will never develop a definitive solution to how to divide up work and then coordinate that work in a conclusive way, as effective collective action rests on a set of tensions. Paradoxes,[22] polarities,[23] and competing values[24] are different ways of describing these tensions. For example, organizations have to adapt to external demands while, at the same time, standardizing internal operations. Working through people and relationships and working through impersonal processes and routines are both necessary.

Because effectiveness is bipolar, there are no timeless solutions to problems of organizing; today's solution will be an unavoidable cause of a new set of problems to be solved tomorrow. Everyone who is reading this article has experienced the iterations of adaptive actions that organizations go through over time. First, we centralize, and then we decentralize only to centralize again. It is hubris for leaders to believe that complex organizational issues can be solved "once and for all." This is not a new insight; the origins of sociology go back to the seminal proposal that a variety of social forms evolve through this dialectical process.[25]

Generative leadership in health care

Generative leadership can be used in small groups and large organizations. It can be used by physicians managing a family's mobilization to support a loved one's treatment, by hospital administrators to tackle organizational issues, and by government agencies to work on system-wide issues.[26-28] The first step is to be able to identify the difference between complicated and complex problems. Table 3 provides a few health care examples that contrast what are essentially technical problems (where a more scientific-engineering approach to management and change is appropriate) with the kinds of adaptive challenges that may best be addressed through the social-dialogic approach of generative leadership. Table 1 provided useful

Table 3. Examples of complicated and complex problems in health care[2]	
Complicated, technical problem	**Complex, adaptive challenge**
How do we ensure that nurses know the safest methods for lifting patients?	How do we improve the health and wellness of nurses?
How do we ensure accurate information is provided during handoffs between care providers?	How do we increase collaboration among care providers?
How do we reduce errors in medications delivered to patients?	How do we get patients to take more responsibility for taking their meds?

guidance on how to identify the differences.

Although there are now decades of studies that show the superiority of generative change processes for producing rapid and transformational results,[29-31] using generative leadership processes requires courage and a higher than average level of socio-emotional intelligence. Leaders have to "let go to let come,"[32,33] a difficult process that will evoke anxiety in both themselves and their followers. Some of this anxiety will be due to the dominant leadership narrative that effective leaders have the right vision and are responsible for setting goals and organizing plans.

Although the virtues of engagement, empowerment, and participative leadership have been extolled for decades, the reality is that a certain percentage of people expect their leaders to have all the answers – or else why are they the leader? Basic beliefs about leadership are violated, in both those they report to and those who report to them, when a leader says "I don't know the answer" and "I am going to engage stakeholders in an emergent process that I cannot predict or control."

Letting go of control is likely to make more visible the underlying paradoxes and polarities that are part of the reason adaptive challenges are so complex and not amenable to technical solutions. The ability to see, appreciate, and work with paradox, to "hold the space of not knowing" in a way that avoids either/or polarizations and at times even transcends both/and to a place of "because…" is a hallmark of later-stage, post-conventional sociocognitive development.[34-36] This will require physicians who want to use generative leadership to engage in personal development processes quite different from skill training and knowledge acquisition,[11] which instead develop the emotional, social, and systemic intelligence of the whole person.

The main point of this article has been to describe and explain the need for a new form of leadership that is emerging to take on the increasing complexity of organizational life. Generative leadership is different from transformational or transactional leadership, in that it doesn't provide a vision, goals, and roles or analyze problems in order to make decisions. Instead, generative leadership articulates the purpose that inspires stakeholders to take on complex

issues, stimulating as many self-organized initiatives as possible, seeing what works and learning as they go, in a never-ending process of adapting to the complexities of collective life.

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