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Part 2: Unfolding Destinies

Leaders Going Boldly Forward

ABSTRACT

This article explores two appreciative approaches to discovering leaders' stories of going boldly forward in their destinies after formal leadership development, demonstrating that further discovery conversations are sustaining and generative.

We are both involved in developing coaching to support leadership development. Leadership development, we heard, was key to changing leadership behaviour that would contribute positively to effective relationships, a common sense of purpose and more constructive impact on the organisation. We began to wonder what impact leadership development and coaching, in particular, was having on leaders in their everyday world. We started to be curious about the untold stories of leaders about going on better or even boldly after leadership development.

We formulated the following positive proposition:

Leaders are making useful, positive, thoughtful and enabling contributions. 'They do the best they can in their context.' Development enables leaders to work out how to be even better.

We wanted to discover leaders' stories of boldness. Our aim is to generate new knowledge that expands the realm of the possible and helps 'members of an organisation envision a collectively desirable future and to convey that vision in ways which successfully translate the impacts of possibility into reality, belief into practice.' (Cooperrider)

We each set up Destiny Discovery processes in two leadership development situations:

- Ashridge Leadership Process (ALP) (for individuals from different organisations)
- A media company's leadership process for 7,500 leaders aimed at shifting their leadership behaviours and changing their culture

As a leader, what do you think are your best qualities that have been enhanced or new qualities you have discovered? What are the stories of leaders going boldly forward?

Ashridge Leadership Process

What is it?

Wendy worked on the Ashridge Leadership Process, which provides leaders with an opportunity to acknowledge the most constructive aspects of their past, appreciate the present and anticipate their future in the framework of their specific context. As illustrated below, leadership is represented as a set of interlocking pieces of a puzzle.

Individuals from varied organisations meet for a five-day residential workshop with four coaching opportunities during and after the workshop.

Discovering Destiny

We had two discovery aims:

- How leaders are continuing to become the 'best they can be in their context' six to twelve months after the leadership process
- The effect they believe leadership development is having

What questions were asked?

50 leaders who had experienced the ALP between six twelve months previously were asked:

- Thinking specifically about yourself since the programme, what are you particularly proud of, or most pleased that you have achieved?
- As a leader, what do you think are your best qualities that have been enhanced or new qualities you have discovered?

Additional questions were:

- Is there anything else in your life that is changing that enables you to be a better leader?
- What do you think your organisation, boss, direct reports, peers or customers, find most valuable about your leadership?

Self-rating scales helped leaders track their own progress. The scales we used were:

- Before coming on this Leadership Programme, how would you rate your leadership capabilities, on a scale of 1 (not effective) to 10 (very effective)?
- Since being on the ALP would you say, on a scale of 1 (no more effective) to 10 (very much more effective), your leadership is?
- What are the stories of leaders going boldly forward?

Three story lines were discovered from the collective narratives:

Relational intelligence – relationships are reframed as interactive and people-centred. Leaders say that interactive people-centre relationships are enabling better performance and more satisfying work culture.

Christine's bold destiny story is one of building inner strength and confidence while maintaining professionalism.

Leaders make things happen – Leaders value themselves and believe others value their ability to make things happen. By working out how to get away from the overwhelming detail, activities and demands, they make space to do the right things. They also give others the chance to make more competent contributions. 'Finding out what is important and doing it improves home and family life as well as work'.

Self-awareness to confidence – Leaders say that as they become more self aware, they start to appreciate their impact on people and specific situations, they become more and more confident. They add and extend their ways of interacting with others, their boss in particular. Individually the stories were a unique tapestry of these story lines.

Christine's story

Work was challenging; the situation was 'riddled with tittle-tattle'. The team Christine inherited was well established – and unconvinced that she should do the job. She felt support from the managing director and the management team. One big success has been the way she took control of the situation with her team: one-to-one meetings with the people who thought they should be in her position; and a group discussion on how to work together as a team. 'I got them to look at themselves and questioned them. Do you think this is really where you want to go? What are you looking for? Are you looking for a balance?' She now talks to people about balance, something she would not have done before. Christine is also working out how she can take her own advice. She has stopped being the person that her managers hide behind. They are now more exposed, both for their strengths and weaknesses. Christine reflects that they are 'not criticising me for it, they are with me on it'. Christine's leadership development experiences gave her the belief that she could bring this off. Taking a stand was risky but she has both the courage and the capabilities to improve the team's performance.

The crucial area where Christine has raised her profile and gained credibility is with her colleagues. She believes in what she is doing. At first they were a bit shocked, but they now respect her more. She looks forward to working together with the team in the more open discussions recently initiated during their first off-site meeting.

The balance in her own life has also been getting better. At home she is doing less organising and coping for everybody else. The household continues to work well but with less stress for her.

Building her inner strengths has shaped to build her confidence and Christine says, 'People take notice and I've gained respect.'

As we listened, we realised that we were all becoming energised by telling and hearing these bold stories. We were impressed and humbled by the significant differences leaders were making in their lives. Amplifying the destiny discovery process, Wendy extended each leader's inquiry to include five people that the leader wanted to hear from. The coaches conducted appreciative interviews, using similar questions, and compiled a personal review which they discussed with the leader to celebrate the positive shifts that he /she is making.

Stories from others about leaders going boldly forward

Leaders' positive contributions were recognised by colleagues, and hearing these appreciative stories was rewarding and energising for individual leaders. Organisationally these stories reinforced the existing culture and emphasised movement on live organisational changes. One organisation from the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry discovered what is most valued is:

- Being approachable, visible and building constructive relationships
- Getting things to happen, enabling delivery

People working with leaders see the positive effect of increased trust and confidence:

- It's quite empowering: it encourages you to take responsibility for yourself, as she delegates effectively and makes you think she trusts you to deliver. It makes you work better: because of your work in a nice environment, you're more productive.
- You've got confidence in decisions he's going to make, kind of reliable core activity.
- Being open to reconcile differences within the department, an emphasis on us being a team. He's not trying to persuade, he is doing the meeting in the best way by listening to others through agreement and by exploring the matters.

Stories of significant shifts and sustained changes were frequent, becoming more 'real' and valuable through the telling and sharing with leaders.

This energy to be bold in discovering destiny stories took us forward into another context with a media organisation where coaching was reported to be 'the jewel in the crown' in their leadership development programme.

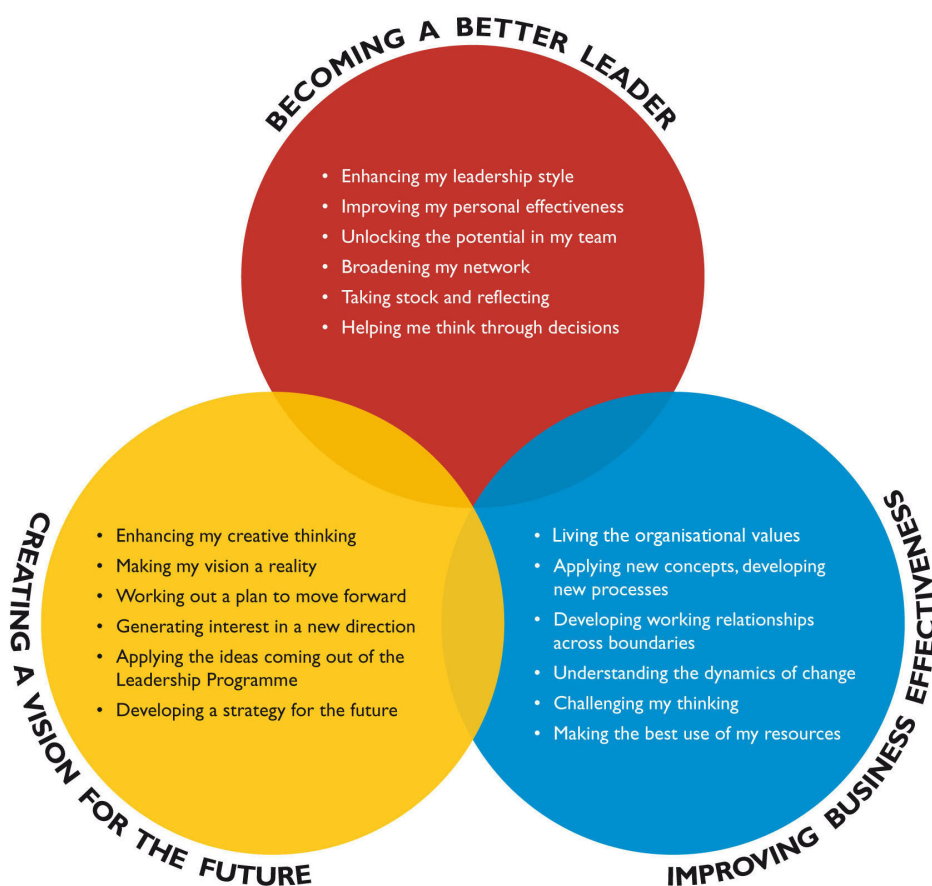


Organising leadership in a media organisation

What is it?

Leadership was identified through consultative process to be a major contributor to leveraging a change in the culture. Many employees enjoyed working for the organisation but did not appreciate the top down leadership style. Eunice worked on a six-month leadership development programme which brought together leaders from all levels to participate in a blended learning programme. This included large group events, learning workshops for small groups, plus action learning, mentoring and coaching. The aim was to enable the culture to be more creative and capable of change through a coaching or engaging approach to leadership.

Figure 1: A provocative proposition for the leadership workshop



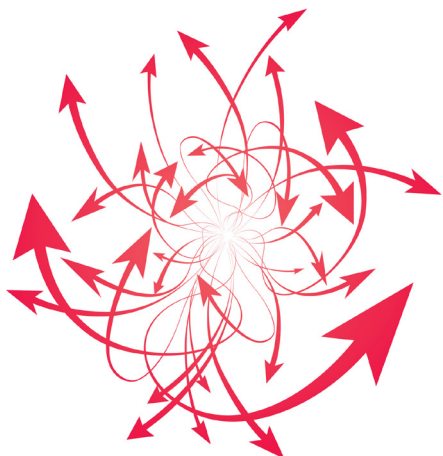
What did Eunice do?

A provocative proposition for coaching was designed which combined personal team development with the organisational challenges.

Coaching proposition: how to learn to become even better in practice

During the workshops leaders were introduced to what coaching is, how it works and its potential benefits. The message went around that coaching was worthwhile, so the uptake rates were high, with ninety per cent telling us that they were gaining what they expected or more from coaching.

Coaching was a success sparking our curiosity to discover the leader's stories about coaching and how it is useful, what worked and how coaching supported them to develop in their role as a leader.



Eunice gained permission for 50 coachees to take part in a discovery interview about their leadership six months after the programme.

What questions were asked?

- What encouraged you to take up the offer of coaching as part of the leadership programme?
- How would you describe your experience of the coaching session?
- What did you find particularly useful or valuable?
- Thinking about your part of the organisation how would you rate your leadership contribution on a scale of 1-10 – before you started coaching and after?
- What takes you to this level? Describe the differences you have been able to make to your leadership style? What impact is this having on others?
- How do you believe the business has benefited from the changes in your leadership performance?

Discovering Destiny stories – spiralling outwards

Leaders described their personal journeys and their impact on the current and future business. Through coaching, leaders were co-creating better realities that spiralled outwards, generating new thinking and ways of acting that were specific to their daily leadership. Each personal bold journey forward was increasing their confidence and possibilities as a leader contributing to an organisation they were proud of.

Many described shifting:

- From controlling to engaging others
- From telling to asking and listening
- From being inundated and stressed to being focused and calm

Impact on the culture was high as a critical mass was cumulatively engaged in the leadership development experience. The spiral gathered momentum with shifts in leadership behaviour occurring and being sustained, which in turn shifted the culture.

Story types: learning loops

From analysing 50 stories, it appeared that there were often multiple shifts in thinking and acting:

Single loop stories

Some were valuable single loop stories where leaders were exploring and deploying existing strengths and approaches. Increased confidence found from knowing the positive effects of what you do and how you do it enabled leaders to be bolder and more effective.

Double loop stories

Those who had double loop stories were boldly going to places they had never been before. They told how they had shifted their perspective and ways of interacting. They gained a better understanding of others' potential and were

often more collaborative. Changes were talked through jointly and equally with staff, with fewer problems, conflict and less lost energy.

One leader gathered together a large group of performing artists to discuss options for change and worked with them to craft a common direction and how to get there.

Triple loop stories

Some leaders talked about how they had reconceived their ideas about leadership and their own capacities. This often led to discovery of their personal passion and how strategically they could have an impact through enabling themselves and others to move very boldly onwards. They also learned how to coach themselves and have coaching-type conversations with work colleagues, hugely expanding their relational repertoire.

Our continuing curiosity

We are excited by the energy and optimism generated through co-discovering destiny stories. Initiating these conversations moves forward the extraordinary leadership that is happening in organisations. Creating the possibility for leaders to become even better, especially through coaching conversations generates personal confidence and esteem. We are curious to see how to generate more opportunities to discover unfolding destinies.

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