LEADERSHIP ISSUES IN MEDIUM SCALE ACEPHALOUS GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

Top-down, dominance based organisations are prevalent in today's world. While they may be efficient, the division of people into leaders and followers, or managers and workers, contains an inherent conflict where distrust and antagonism often lead to destructive and even violent organisational dynamics.

As a response to the iniquities inherent in top-down dominance hierarchies some groups form acephalous organisations, where there is no structured leadership. The process of leadership is still necessary, but it manifests in very different ways.

In order to investigate leadership in acephalous groups, we first explore leadership patterns in the animal kingdom with such organisational structures as dominance hierarchies and swarms. We note the links between the interplay of the structurally determined biological make up of the animal with its environment, and the social structure adopted. This forms the foundation for exploring human organisational possibilities. Next, we examine leadership theories, models and concepts that shift the focus from the leader as an individual to viewing leadership as a process resulting from the complex recursive interactions between leaders and followers in a given environment.

Moving beyond the idea of seeing leadership as an interactional process between leader and follower, in acephalous groups, the very distinction between leader and follower is dissolved. Convergence is a medium scale acephalous group in Canterbury, New Zealand formed by a loose network of 300-500 alternative life-stylers and people seeking a break from their usual mainstream life, who come together for a gathering for five days each year. Preliminary research results from interviews and a survey at the most recent Convergence gathering yielded some interesting dynamics within the group's operation and understandings of how it copes with some of the practical challenges of operating acephalously. This research could encourage other organisations to consider an acephalous structure or incorporate some acephalous principles into their operation.

Keywords: complexity leadership, acephalous, relational leadership, complexity leadership theory

INTRODUCTION

We tend to think of leadership in terms of a "great man" out front and in charge, motivating, inspiring, guiding, instructing and controlling those about him (Carlisle, 1841). We often think of a chain of command with responsibilities delegated to leaders at

different levels within an organisation. We have moved far beyond the small family bands of humans roaming the savannah and many unintended consequences have arisen as our human organisations have scaled up until we literally live together in our millions (Atkinson, Piketty, & Saez, 2011; Korten, 2010).

As soon as we designate someone as a leader, we have created division. The leader assumes greater power and responsibility and is rewarded accordingly. Followers on the other hand defer to the leader, often becoming resentful of decisions made on their behalf and the inequitable division of rewards. People can feel dispossessed (Butler & Anthanasiou, 2013) and powerless.

Those in positions of power get to define the social reality which becomes increasingly embedded within each individual (Danaher, Shirato, & Webb, 2000; Lakoff, 2010). Once we accept a particular version of how the world is, it becomes hard to conceive of alternatives (Vickers, 1968). We often become canalysed into the accepted view, even if we are oppressed by it. We become so accustomed to the accepted way of seeing things we even fight to maintain the oppression under which we suffer, because it is familiar and so deeply embedded in our sense of self (Galtung, 1969; Peltzer, 2003; Weininger, 2002). Wheatley & Freize (2011) write of our tendency to seek heroes who will save us. They say, "It is time to give up these hopes and expectation that only breed dependency and passivity".

From the other perspective, leaders are often trapped and constrained either by the expectations of the followers, who end up scapegoating them (Stacey, 2011), or by having their options restricted by external influences. It is time to explore new ways we can come together and organise ourselves that are more humane and harmonious (Davidson, 1983).

Margaret Mead dedicated her life to exploring alternative ways we can structure our world that might lead to living more humane, caring lives. Her work challenging the rigid sexual morality of the 1960s after her ground breaking, albeit controversial, work based on her time living in Samoa (Mead, 2001), helped change the world and forge new ways we can live together. In the same way that she believed war was a "man made" creation rather than an inexorable outcome of human biology (Mead, 1940), the way we enact leadership also has alternatives that can open new possibilities for our social organisation.

This paper explores acephalous organisational structures (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; Castoriadis, 1997; Rhodes, 1995), which have no structured or enduring leadership, that may be a viable and more humane alternative for many organisations.

The organisational possibilities of groups of humans emerge from the interactions between our structurally determined biological make up, our social interactions and the nature of our environment (Luhmann, 1995; Maturana, 2002). We therefore begin our exploration of acephalous leadership by examining the styles of leadership that have evolved in the animal kingdom over millions of years. This gives us a foundation from

which to explore how our increased cognitive capacity has increased our organisational options.

From there, we investigate leadership theories and models that view leadership as a relational process encompassing leaders, followers and the changing environment in which they all operate. Extending our search further, we consider acephalous organisations where there is no structured, enduring leadership (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; Neilson, 2004). Leadership becomes distributed, low key, transitory and self-selected. Acephalous structures are not always effective, but where they are, they may herald a new style of organisation that is more humane and supportive of the people in the organisation.

The Convergence gathering is used as a case study of a medium scale acephalous organisation. Convergence is a five day annual gathering of a loose network of 300-500 alternative life-stylers and others seeking time away from their usual mainstream lifestyle, that has evolved an acephalous mode of organisation over almost thirty years in the South Island of New Zealand. We explore how decision making actually happens and discuss some issues that arose during the most recent gathering as Convergence grapples with the practical realities of experimenting with a new style of organisation.

LEADERSHIP IN NATURE

Our organisational capabilities have evolved as we grappled with the dynamic interplay between the human players in an ever changing environment. By investigating some of the organisational structures in nature, we see how and why our structures may have evolved as they have. Some species operate through dominance based hierarchies, while others are able to operate acephalously on an extremely large scale.

Dominance hierarchies

It could be easily assumed that top-down dominance based hierarchies are natural for humans since they are so often found in nature. A wide range of animals such as horses (Feist & McCullach, 1976) chickens (Croney, Prince-Kelly, & Meller, 2007) and elephants (Esposito, 2008) naturally live in small dominance based family bands. The environment throws up constant challenges and threats, so physical strength, courage, wisdom and knowledge are critical to the survival of the group. Dominance hierarchies seek the best individual in the group with those qualities to guide the others with less skill and ability.

Care and co-operation is vital in a hierarchy and violence is usually avoided, but violence or the threat of violence remains an ever present possibility should other means of controlling the group fail. Without language the use or threat of violence is a temptingly easy way of engendering compliance (Peterson & Wrangham, 1997). Dominance hierarchies tend to operate well in animals that live together in relatively small numbers because they are not very complex.

As with any dominance based structure there is a permanent tension between those in positions of power and those who seek to take over those in positions of power. As those in power get older and less able, the contenders step up their attempts to gain power.

Primates also typically use dominance hierarchies (Cowlishaw & Dunbar, 1991). Again, we might be tempted to think that since our closest related species use dominance strategies, we also should. In spite of our similarities, our bio-psycho-social structure is extremely different and we live in our environment in extremely different ways. Bonobo chimpanzees (Parish, 1994) have developed a style of social organisation that is more co-operative than other chimpanzees, which further demonstrates that alternatives are possible.

We live together in the millions with high level of technology and complex social structures that give us many more options as to how we organise ourselves. When small scale dominance hierarchies are scaled up to multi-level hierarchies, the power accruing to individuals and the rewards associated with the top levels becomes wildly disproportionate and the potential for abuse and structural violence, even if unintended, is enormous (Zizek, 2008).

Swarming

Swarming (Rolling, 2013) is self-organising behaviour that can involve very high numbers of creatures co-ordinating their actions without a leader. In terms of the scale of human communities, we have more in common with fish, birds, ants and bees than apes. Swarming only requires agents with minimal capacity, obeying a small number of simple rules that collectively results in complex behavioural patterns of the whole system. This means swarming behaviour can be readily simulated through algorithms (e.g. Reynolds (1987)). Ants and bees are capable of very complex specialised behaviours co-ordinating the actions of millions of creatures. Ants (Gordon, 1995) can switch roles according to the needs of the colony. The queen merely has a reproductive role, so the colony actually self organises acephalously. Bees use a distributed decision making process to select a new nest site by gaining information on six or more weighted variables for each of a dozen alternative sites (Seeley, 1999).

Cronin (2012) investigated a small ant colony in Japan and found consensus decision making to occur once a particular quorum threshold was reached. The larger the group, the higher the threshold. He also noted a trade off between quorum size and time. If an ant colony was under a time pressure to find the location of a new nest they would decide with a smaller consensus which, of course, increased the risk of an incorrect decision.

HUMAN SYSTEMS

Human beings also exhibit swarming behaviours. Helbing & Bolay (2001) researched the self-organising patterns of human pedestrians and found many predictable patterns that bore a remarkable resemblance to other natural phenomena such as turbulence patterns in

gases. Dyer, Johansson, Helbing, Couzin, and Krause (2009) looked at how consensus decisions are arrived at by small and large groups of humans using swarm intelligence. Such self-organising swarm intelligence may operate in large computer based human networks like Wikipedia (Ciffolilli, 2003) and Linux (Lee and Cole, 2014) (although they both have a top-level veto in place). The power of maintaining reputation (Gibbons, 1992) is critical in such self-organising on-line groups.

We human beings are different from other swarming creatures because we are capable of far more complex behaviours that mere rule following (Stacey, 2011, p284). Feedback learning loops (Bateson I, II and even III (Bateson, 2002; Tosey, 2006)) give us the ability to analyse the functioning of the system and alter it to better meet our needs. Hinde (1976, p15) notes "Non-human primates may throw light on human social structure not so much because they resemble man, but because they lack his most special attributes". In particular the human pre-frontal cortex is involved in such functions as memory and planning, reasoning and impulse management, which greatly enhance our capacity for social organisation. Our ability to use language (Maturana, 2002) opens a whole world of conceptualising and recursive dialogue that allows us to knowingly alter the state of the system.

Von Bertalanffy warned of robotomorphism (Davidson, 1983), whereby we only see a human as a machine or an animal. Only humans share the world of symbols and values. Vickers notes our human abilities as appreciative systems (Vickers, 1984) enables us to appreciate our situation in a way no other animal can and Rosen emphasises our ability to anticipate future states (Rosen, 2012). There is no reason to believe that our ability to adapt and find new ways of organising ourselves will not continue to grow, thus widening the range of potential viable organisational structures under which we can operate.

An acephalous structure is therefore in tune with organisational strategies used in nature at the scale we live. We have evolved highly developed skills at co-operating and co-ordinating, building trust and language skills to negotiate difference. Perhaps the only reason we have not fully investigated the viability of acephalous groups is that we are blinkered by our present conceptions of leadership so alternative possibilities remain beyond our horizon of conceivability.

There are a number of people suggesting that as a human race we are approaching a tipping point where we might be bifurcating into fundamentally more complex creatures operating at higher levels of consciousness (Laszlo, 2008; Wilber, 2007). Such new humans have been dubbed as homo spiritualis (Friedman & Friedman, 2008), homo noeticus (www.noeticus.org), integral humans (Wilber, 2001) and Homo sapiens cosmicus (http://isss.org/world/laszlo_incoming_2012; Laszlo A,2012)

If there is a basis to these claims, then the capacities of human beings to evolve in a multitude of previously unconceived ways might be possible and radically different social and organisational structures might be viable. We now have a base from which we can explore our understanding of human leadership.

LEADERSHIP THEORIES, MODELS AND PERSPECTIVES

Leadership research has tended to focus on the great man out front leading his people (Carlisle, 1841). The Wikipedia entry for leadership (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leadership), discusses many forms of leadership, but the focus is clearly on an individual in the role of leader. Clearly, there can be no leader without followers prepared to acquiesce, so we cannot understand leadership without an understanding of leader, follower and the relationship between the two. The theories, models and perspectives discussed below allow us to see leadership rather as an interactional and relational process between people.

Relational Leadership

Relational leadership (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) moves beyond a dualistic leader-follower viewpoint. It recognises that leadership does not just lie with the leader, but is an emergent product of the interactions between leaders and followers. They note that a relational view can be seen from both an entity view, linking with post-positivist philosophies, where "distinct entities come into contact, meaning that relations are derivative of the independent entities" (p7) and a constructivist view, which "conveys an understanding of individuals and collectives as embedded in and constituting field of relationships, making relationality endemic to the perspective" (p7).

Complexity Leadership Theory

Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey (2007) suggest that top-down hierarchies are not as well suited in knowledge based society. Their complexity leadership theory "frames leadership as a complex interactive dynamic from which adaptive outcomes (e.g., learning, innovation, and adaptability) emerge." (p298). Complexity Leadership Theory distinguishes between leadership and leader, noting leaders as "individuals who act in ways that influence this dynamic and the outcomes" (p299) and leadership as "an emergent, interactive dynamic that is productive of adaptive outcomes".

Viable Systems Model

Beer's viable systems model (Beer, 1984) proposes that each viable system is composed of five sub-systems. A fractal arrangement exists where each viable system contains a viable system and is contained in a viable system. Leadership can be demonstrated in any of the five sub-systems. Beer warns against seeing the sub-systems as a linear hierarchy. All sub-systems are necessary for the effective operation of the whole system.

There is always a tension between centralised control from the top, where system five has too much power and the whole system loses flexibility and distributed control as in Convergence, which risks being too flexible. System five can then lack the necessary overview and parts start to lack cohesion. In an acephalous group all people have access to all levels and no level accrues greater rewards for work done.

Leadership issue in medium scale acephalous groups

Situational leadership

Situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1972) proposes that different styles of leadership are needed for different situations. This is evident in Tuckman's stages of group process (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) where a group starts by *forming* together and getting to know each other. As differences become apparent they move into *storming* and conflict. In the *norming* stage the group works through the issues and in the *performing* stage they function effectively. Finally there is an *adjourning* stage when the group prepares to end.

Different styles of leadership may be appropriate at different times. While forming a more directive approach is often effective to establish a clear direction and vision. A more directive approach might also help move out of a storming stage. As the group matures more people are ready to take up leadership roles and the group becomes more egalitarian. Interestingly, Convergence began from a strong vision from one person or a small group and matured into an acephalous structure over time.

Eco-leadership

Simon Western (2013) cites four styles of leadership: the controller, therapist, messiah and eco-leader. Of these, the eco-leader is the networker, who builds bridges and views the whole system and its parts. Ethics, social responsibility and sustainability are highly prized.

Western notes the needs for a change of the underlying metaphor from machine to eco-system. He sees the eco-leader as the leader best adapted to the challenges of the 21st century. He writes of the eco-leadership as leadership distributed through a network. He cites many environmental organisations working to reclaim the natural environment needing a structure that mirrors those found in nature. This links to the concept in panarchy (Gunderson & Holling, 2002) where levels in an eco-system need to be matched by corresponding social levels.

Autopoiesis and Structural Coupling

Maturana and Varela's concept of structural coupling (Maturana, 2002) shifts the focus from the individual to the whole social interaction including autopoietic participants and the medium in which the interactions occurs. He talks of the relational space linking the person and the niche. The interactions are non-linear and recursive leading to novelty and unpredictability. He notes that the recursive interactions can result in domination or love (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008).

From this point of view, we can only make sense of the leadership dynamics as a function of the inter-relationships between leaders, followers and the niche in which they all operate. Maturana focuses on the process that happens and thus looks at aspects like languaging as a verb and its importance in human interactions.

ACEPHALOUS LEADERSHIP

Acephalous leadership further problematises the view of leadership, taking away the very labels of leader and follower in any enduring sense. Leadership moves from being attached to a particular person or persons and to a process emerging from the interactions between equally valued agents where roles are fluid.

Individuals show leadership in the moment and people may exert on ongoing influence on others on the group. Leadership becomes distributed across the whole group, transitory as people step forward in specific situations and stepping back when the need is met, and self selecting so individuals find their own type and level of contribution. Leadership emerges from within rather than being imposed from the top and is low key.

Acephalous leadership has its strengths and weaknesses. It is an egalitarian way of operating, inducing a sense of ownership, and is extremely flexible, adapting to new situations because it does not have a rigid structure, which is slow to change like an ocean liner under full steam. On the other hand, top-down hierarchies can make decisions quickly because the top person has the authority to act without prolonged consultation, however those decisions often breed resentment and can only be made within the myriad on contractual restrictions which apply.

Table one: Compares acephalous leadership and top-down hierarchical leadership. Generalised statements have been used to highlight differences, but there are always exceptions to such generalisations (e.g. there is individual decision making in an acephalous group and shared decision making in a top-down hierarchy). Organisations are seldom purely acephalous or top-down hierarchies. They are more likely to be a mix.

Acephalous Leadership	Top-down Hierarchical Leadership
Distributed power	Power held in top of hierarchy
Distributed knowledge	Knowledge held at top of hierarchy
All equally valued and rewarded	Greater value and rewards to top of hierarchy
Focus on relationships	Focus on efficiency
Shared decision making	Individual decision making
Egalitarian	Resentment and discontent
Loose structure	Rules and procedures
Trust	Accountability
Flexible	Constrained by structure
Risk of being too flexible and losing coherence	Risk of being too structured and stifling creativity
Open to change	Resists change

An acephalous structure does not suit all groups. Several factors have enabled Convergence to operate acephalously: it only meets for five or six days a year, high levels

of trust have evolved, there are no highly specialised roles, and the impact of failure is not usually critical.

LEADING AND DECISION MAKING IN CONVERGENCE

Interviews with gathering participants revealed the process of leadership to be more complex than initially considered. Decision making varies depending on the type of issue and how critical it is.

Routine tasks or those well covered by previous agreements

There is a small fluid group of people with considerable experience named by one participant the "invisible leadership". They undertake routine tasks such as hiring marquees and toilets and cope with situations where there are clear precedents. This "invisible leadership" quietly moves in the background talking to people when issues arise to diffuse potential problems.

Individuals stepping forward

Self responsibility and co-creation are core values of Convergence. There is no authority to take issues to and so it behoves each individual to take responsibility for situations they come across. Situations cannot be left. They are either resolved by the person who sees it or they find someone who can resolve the situation.

Sub-groups self-select

When a non-trivial issue is identified someone will step forward and call for a group to deal with it. That group discusses the issue and makes a decision on behalf of the whole group. Individuals therefore self-select the type and level of their involvement and accept the decisions made by groups they choose not to be a part of.

Circle discussion and website

Morning meetings of the whole gathering were found to be impractical as small issues could consume the gathering. Smaller heart sharing circles, originally designed more for personal exploration have become a place to take issues. The Convergence facebook page has also become a venue for discussing issues and maintaining contact with people between gatherings.

Aggregate choices

Aggregate choices are made where the collective actions of individuals makes a particular choice viable or unviable without a decision necessarily being made in the usual sense. This links to swarm dynamics where an individual's behaviour depends on what neighbours do (Rolling, 2013). Just as a virus might spread through a population or die out, a certain meme or viewpoint might reach a tipping point (Gladwell, 2001) and be

accepted by the whole group. Ending long, drawn out morning meetings happened because enough people individually chose to not attend rather than through any decision making process.

Since there is nobody to seek for permission for any activity, a participant with a new idea must seek support from other participants. If they gain sufficient support, the idea will gain traction. In this way butterfly effects (Lorenz, 1963), beginning from a very small idea have grown to be very important for the whole gathering.

ISSUES ARISING FROM THE MOST RECENT GATHERING

The 2013/2104 gathering was generally seen as more contentious than usual and may mark a transition in the development of the organisation. Convergence has always tried to keep rules to a minimum. A survey conducted of 152 participants showed a general view that Convergence had become "a bit loose" in recent times. Other factors behind this "looseness" might be the aging demographic with older people having less energy to be proactive and the Christchurch earthquakes, which while having no direct impact, left many people with chronic trauma affecting their ability to step forward as they might have in the past.

Some of the issues that arose may be related to the specific nature of Convergence, while others are more indicative of the nature of acephalous groups in general. Issues mentioned in interviews include:

1. A complaint received about a workshop facilitator. A group of elders was convened to find a solution as had happened in the past. The issue was also then taken to a heart sharing circle where it became more public and the decision of the elders questioned, which had not previously happened.

2. The Convergence website states that people will not be admitted after the opening ceremony for the atmosphere to build unhindered by new influences and to discourage "day trippers". A couple came to Convergence the day before it closed and were refused entry. Other long term participants told them they could stay. The couple took the issue to a sharing circle where a compromise was reached so they stayed and negotiated a payment.

3. A minor issue highlighted communications issues. Water seemed to be coming from a broken pipe. A group dug a hole to find the pipe. Not finding it, they turned off taps further up and found the water still flowing and concluded it was a natural spring. At least one other group came by, not realising all the first group had done and continued digging for the water. There was a board in the networking tent where such maintenance issues could be reported, but this was not used or not known about. This may appear to be a trivial issue, but it is representative of the myriad of trivial issues to be resolved for the gathering to proceed smoothly.

These specific events and others point to a number of general leadership issues for Convergence that were brought forward during the survey and interviews.

Tension between too much structure and not enough

Convergence operates on as few rules as possible. This relies on participants using an internal discipline and remaining flexible to the needs and desires of others and the organisation. The organisation can slip into being loose and chaotic. Convergence has been able to ride close to the edge of chaos (Lewin, 1992; Waldrop, 1993), thus making the threat of a perturbance like the Christchurch earthquakes more likely to take the organisation into deep chaos for a time. Many participants who highly value the lack of rules and structure accept the cost of some degree of chaos and looseness. One of the participants stated, "We need to ensure that there is enough structure to contain the event and keep it safe within the ethics and in line with the philosophy of Convergence."

Lack of specific roles

With no particular person "in charge" apart from people self-selecting tasks, there is a risk that things get missed or "an elephant in the room" develops to which everyone turns a blind eye. Health and safety issues, for example could easily become serious if nobody was to step forward and name the problem.

 The invisible leadership maintains a low key, collaborative overview remaining alert for anything not being noticed. Some participants, particularly newer ones, talked of the difficulty of knowing whom to talk to about an issue they were unable to resolve by themselves.

A part of the looseness discussed above has resulted in some activities not being continued in this last year, such as new participants' induction and the "soul soothers" (providers of emotional, mediation and counselling support), so problems that would have been quietly sorted in the background could remain unresolved further contributing to the looseness.

Communication

 In an acephalous group all people who might be in a position of picking up a leadership role for any given task need access to the skills and knowledge to undertake that task. That means acephalous organisations need to have more robust communication channels than most other organisations as seen in the natural spring story.

New blood and systems skills

Convergence has an ageing demographic. It was begun by people in their 20s and 30s, who are now nearing retirement age. They have less energy and need to pass on their knowledge and skills to a younger generation, who will then make Convergence their

own. Around a third of participants each gathering has not participated previously. A new generation needs to embed systems skills of working with the unpredictable and chaotic, being aware of personal biases, see the world through the eyes of others and embrace the big picture (MacGill, 2013).

Remaining transparent

Because much decision making is done "invisibly", it is easy for the impression to be gained that there is a small hidden group controlling the organisation and everyone else is blocked out. Because there is no problem attracting enough people to fill the campsite, there is little or no marketing, which can also give the appearance of Convergence being an exclusive group.

Learning organisation

As issues arise Convergence appears to have good structures for discussing those issues, but not as effective systems for coming to a collective agreement as to what should be done and putting that agreement into place. Especially since Convergence's main gathering only occurs once a year, issues can be forgotten and the learning lost (Senge, 2006). A review procedure through the year would help complete the feedback loop so learning occurs (Bateson, 2000) and progressively more effective structures could be put in place to guide the organisation.

CONCLUSIONS

Traditional top-down hierarchies have an inherent structural violence that reduces their effectiveness. Acephalous organisational functioning is an alternative that is more equitable and humane. Both styles of organisation have their strengths and weaknesses and there are circumstances where an acephalous structure is not viable.

Leadership is vital in all organisations, but it manifests very differently in an acephalous organisation. Current thinking on leadership is moving from the great man model to relational ideas where leadership becomes an emergent process arising from the interactions between leader and follower. An acephalous structure dissolves the distinction between follower and leader and leadership becomes transitory, distributed, low key and self-selecting. A different set of skills are needed to be a successful participant in an acephalous organisation.

The Convergence gathering in New Zealand is an example of a sustainable medium scale organisation experimenting with an acephalous structure. A number of issues arise from the practical realities of organising without set leaders such as balancing the right level of organisation, maintaining cohesion, communication between participants and closing the learning loops. Researching more acephalous groups would help establish guidelines for successful acephalous operation in a variety of settings and encourage more groups to increase wellbeing and humanness by using acephalous principles.

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