

# Leadership – a team process developed through context awareness

Written by

MARIA ÅKERLUND

*Henrysson, Åkerlund & Sjöberg AB*

This article describes the design, content and theoretical underpinnings of a leader development programme implemented with many groups over several years. Underlying assumptions guiding decisions about content and format are also described as well as outcomes and tentative conclusions about effects of the programme.

## Introduction

A contemporary perspective on leadership is that it is a team process (Day, Harrison & Halpin, 2009). It is, from this perspective, a function of the group trying to solve a task and to coordinate efforts. Hence, it is a potential that resides in all of us and is acted out at the member level and emerges at the group level as a state or process. To facilitate this leadership process, teams usually delegate coordination and other forms of leader functions to one person. Evolutionary leadership theory (van Vugt & Ahuja, 2010) describes a “reverse dominance hierarchy” in early human groups, where the influence of a leader is derived from the legitimacy conferred by subordinates who are the true holders of power. This standpoint is supported by studies on implicit followership theory. Barling (2014) refers to a study by Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2012) in which followers’ beliefs in the co-production of leadership was the research focus. Their conclusion was that followers who see themselves as partners in the leadership process work better together and are more productive. Barling concludes from this that leadership training should focus on fostering a conception of followers as equals in the leadership process.

In modern organisations, where most teams are organised in hierarchies based on levels of authority and accountability, leaders are appointed to teams, or leaders are assigned tasks and form teams that are then responsible for performing the tasks. In neither case does the

team spontaneously form around a task and select the leader to whom the members can delegate the leadership function. This may go against our deepest instincts as human beings and cause us to resist leadership. The process of selecting our leaders and choosing to give up some of our own leadership to them may be impossible to shortcut. If this process does not take place a team will not be led, and will not develop its full potential. The prerequisite for that process is trust. Members will give up some of their authority to people they trust in a leadership function.

In today’s organisations, the pressure of the accountability hierarchy sometimes triggers an instrumental and individualistic view of co-workers. For decades, leadership theory has focused on the leader and her/his influence on co-workers, and leadership development has focused on the leader’s personal development. In recent years, leadership development has expanded from theories about leader personality and leader abilities to theories about the mutual influence between leaders and followers. Researchers and theorists are exploring leadership as a function of the group and its needs (Hackman, 2002). In an article by Uhl-Bien and colleagues (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, Melissa, & Carsten, 2014) the authors summarise decades of leadership research thus: “What is most surprising in this review is the extent to which leadership scholars have long agreed that leadership is a process occurring in interactions between leaders and followers. We can see this as we trace the clear progression from leader-centric, to follower-centric, to relational views recognising leadership as a co-constructed process between leaders and followers acting in context.”

Theories of team development also describe the leadership process as both an input variable and an emergent state in the group and as a *developmental* process (Wheelan, 2005). As a team develops its work processes and forms

increasingly reality based and shared mental models of its goals, roles and methods, as well as a sense of efficacy and cohesion, the members will reclaim some of the leadership that initially emanated from them. In a fully developed team, leadership is shared among the members.

During the years that we have worked with leader development we have heard participants emphasize a need for tools. They want us to provide them with tools that they can use to make their co-workers act according to what is expected of them, to solve conflicts between co-workers and to make co-workers accept and preferably like decisions that they as leaders or management at higher levels in the organisation have made.

We, on the other hand, assume that to trigger follower behaviour in co-workers, leaders need to pay close attention to the exchange between members, between members and leaders and between the team and its surroundings. Tools need to be implemented in tune with the context. To become a good leader, one needs to consider group processes and emergent states and learn how to gradually build functional communication and create relevant feedback loops. That is the way to help groups develop their full potential and it is the group's developmental level that determines the level of performance of the individual member. Hackman talks about the difference between creating favourable conditions and actively managing causal factors in real time. The idea he puts forward is that "certain conditions get established, whether deliberately or by happenstance, and groups unfold in their own idiosyncratic ways within those conditions. Rather than trying to pinpoint and directly manipulate specific 'causes' of performance outcomes, leaders would try to identify the small number of conditions that increase the likelihood that a team will naturally evolve into an ever more competent performing unit" (Hackman, 2002). This view can be said to reflect the difference between using "tools" with little attention to the context and developing context awareness and attending to team needs as they emerge.

Avolio and colleagues (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa & Chan, 2009) showed in a meta-analysis that the average ROI of leadership training is D .65. A recent meta-analysis (Lacerenza, Reyes, Marlow, Joseph & Salas, 2017) gives us information about how leadership training should be designed, delivered and implemented to render wanted effects. The importance of practice is highlighted by the results.

Our goal when we design leadership training is to give participants as many opportunities to practice what we believe are functional leader behaviours as possible.

## Design, content, and underlying assumptions

The training programmes have ranged between six and ten days and the training groups have been composed of six to eighteen leaders. The frequency of the meetings have ranged from one day a month to two days a month. The participants in each group have come from the same organisation and the meetings have taken place at venues outside of their respective workplaces. The number and frequency of days and the size and composition of the groups are to a degree a result of clients' wishes and budgets. The content and form of delivery are a result of our understanding of leadership and learning.

The basis for our leadership training is a team-focused and developmental perspective of leadership. Organisations are becoming increasingly team based and the interdependency within and between groups is increasing. We believe in developing attention and sensitivity to emergent leadership processes that support the team's development and goals. We therefore strive to make these training programmes as experience-based as possible. We want the participants to discover leadership and its different aspects for themselves, rather than have it explained to them. In this article, we will describe how we train participants to pay attention to the group dynamics in their teams, to exert their leadership in resonance with these dynamics and to encourage team members' leadership.

Based on our assumption that good leaders pay attention to the context and the processes and emergent states in their team we have chosen four main themes for the training. These themes are:

- The concept of role, goal and context
- Group development
- Functional communication
- Process- and task leadership

We have tried to keep these four themes simple and concrete whilst avoiding the reduction of their inherent complexity and the complexity of their interdependency. A sign that we to some extent had achieved our goal was something one of the participants wrote in a project report towards the end of the training programme:

“This is something that I am satisfied with; I want to go with the flow, be more adaptive and attentive to what might make my co-workers work together and thereby benefit the organisation. I have probably been unnecessarily reluctant to let them be three separate groups, because I thought that we must work together towards the same goal, no matter what. During this year, I have learnt that the two are not mutually exclusive. ... I think it has ... to do with the leadership development programme in itself and all that we talked about there: group development and group dynamics, ways of communicating and so on.”

### Role, goal and context in teams

The most basic of the principles on which we rely; awareness of role, goal and context is a prerequisite for understanding process and task, phase development and communication in teams.

The concept of role, goal and context that we use was formulated by Yvonne Agazarian (Gantt, 2005 and Gantt & Agazarian, 2005) as a tool to clarify the path for members to taking up a role and in so doing exploring the context for information about which behaviours will best support the context and its goals. In a team, it is important to remember that members need to support both the development of effective team work, which requires developing working relationships and functional communication, *and* work on the assigned task, which requires technical skill. The concept also illustrates that as individuals we have rich personalities and personal resources and preferences, and that we need to make the best possible alignment of our personal resources with the role. It is the bits of our personality that match the role requirements that need to be mobilised. For example, we all have the potential for leadership and followership. It is the context and the goals of the context that determine if follower or leader behaviour is most functional at a given point in time. Goals and roles are continually changing with the changing context.

Lack of clarity about goals and roles is a major source of ineffectiveness, low morale and conflicts in organisations. Specific and difficult goals are the single strongest predictor of organisational performance and job satisfaction (Locke & Latham, 1990). The most effective team intervention, according to a study on the effectiveness of team building, is goal

clarification, and the second most effective intervention, according to the same study, is role clarification (Klein, DiazGranados, Salas, Le, Burke & Lyons, 2009).

All teams have the potential for structured, goal-oriented work. Sometimes teams get stuck in leader dependence and avoidance of responsibility or in conflicts around unresolved differences, but they always have the potential to reorganise and get back on track towards the assigned goal. Being clear on what the team's goal is and seeing how the team is connected to the larger organisation and its goals (the team's context), helps the team stay on track and develop. When roles are clear, it is clear which behaviours belong inside the role and which behaviours do not. This helps team members take up their roles and work towards the goals of the roles and of the team. Role clarity also helps us see the difference between person and role. A role in a team is connected to a goal and that goal in turn is connected to a superordinate team goal. These goals might be different from our personal goals. They need to be *compatible* with our personal goals if we are to be comfortable with our role.

We built our leadership training on four underlying assumptions:

Our first underlying assumption was that training participants in paying close attention to the different roles they and their co-workers have in different contexts, and to the different goals those contexts and thereby those roles have, will enhance their ability to exert their leadership in resonance with the context.

### Phase development in teams

Warren Bennis and Herbert Shepard (1956) formulated a group development theory describing groups as moving through predictable phases in a predictable order, and as coming up against a series of conflicts as they move through these phases. To be able to resolve these conflicts, groups need to remove obstacles to clear communication. Group development, according to this theory, is a movement towards increasingly direct and clear communication. The most important obstacles to clear communication, according to Bennis and Shepard, are members' relationships toward authority and intimacy. When we communicate, there will be information connected to the topic about which we are communicating, and there will also be information about ourselves and about our relationship

with those that we are communicating with. This in turn will be affected by our reactions to current authority relationships in the group and the current climate of closeness or distance in the group.

To develop, a team needs to recognise and integrate differences (Agazarian, 1997). That includes all kinds of differences. In every team, there will be different personalities, opinions, knowledge, experience and preferences. We tend to react to differences. This is in many ways functional. Our brains are wired to look for deviations in our surroundings since changes in our environment could be connected to danger. When we react to deviations from the expected we quickly prepare to either flee or fight. In a team, we frequently come up against differences and if there is a high degree of reactivity to the differences this can create a pervasive state of flight or fight in the team. When we are in a state of flight or fight, our problem-solving ability is diminished and we are less oriented towards reality.

Susan Wheelan (2005) has created an integrated model of group development, the IMGD, that builds on the theory of Bennis and Shepard (1956) and several other group researchers and theorists, and in which the dynamics outlined above are embedded. The model describes four phases that all groups go through in a predictable order. The phases are Dependency and inclusion, Counter-dependency and fight, Trust and structure and Work and productivity.

A team needs to establish a platform of similarity that binds the members together enough for them to be able to explore differences. This means that during the first phase according to the IMGD, Dependency and inclusion, members will focus on similarities and avoid differences. In an environment of similarity, it is easier to open up to differences. This is also the phase when a group handles the authority issue by placing all the authority in the leader and members are reluctant to share any of the leadership functions. Once a team has laid a foundation of similarity, differences will surface and members will initially try to handle the differences by fighting them. This phase also presents the other version of the authority issue – the competition for authority. The second phase of group development, Counter-dependency and fight, is characterised by fight and power struggles. For a team to be able to integrate differences and develop beyond this phase it needs to balance the fight energy and

activate its problem-solving ability and reality testing. It also needs to link authority and status to behaviours that are functional for the team and supports the team's goals. The goals therefore need to be clarified. If the team succeeds in clarifying goals, roles and a viable structure it will move out of the Counter-dependency and fight phase. Relationships will be affected by the common experience of conflict resolution and members will have learned more about the interdependencies that are the basis for the team. This in turn triggers members' reactions to closeness. The team has reached the third phase of development, Trust and structure. If it can negotiate its interdependencies successfully it will reach a level of productivity and effectiveness – which is phase four, Work and productivity – that is not possible without overcoming the inherent obstacles on the way. The fourth phase is characterised by high cohesion, a sense of team self-efficacy and shared leadership.

Using a model of group development that describes the different phases that a group moves through makes it easier to understand the context that members work in at any given point in time. If we know, for example, that it is normal and expected to arrive at a phase of emergent differences that will trigger frustration and conflict, chances are that we will more easily understand that this is a natural characteristic of the context that we are in and not necessarily something we need to take personally or attribute to other members of the team. When we take up a role in a team we will be subjected to the group dynamic that is a result of the team's trying to recognise and integrate differences and its effort to balance issues around authority and interdependence. This will affect our behaviour. This means that how we behave in a group has at least as much to do with the group dynamic as it has to do with our personalities (Agazarian, 1997). A team developmental perspective also makes it easier to understand what behaviour is required of me in my role as team member in a certain phase. Simply stated, a phase theory helps us understand the context at a certain point in time, the goal of the context at that point in time, and the tasks and challenges of our role at that point in time.

Our second underlying assumption was thus that training participants in tracking a group's development and establishing its current developmental phase enhances their context awareness and ability to exert leadership in resonance with the current context.

## Communication in teams

Communication is the basis for a lot of what goes on in a team. To quote an authority in the field, "Communication is both the functional means by which groups accomplish whatever their goals may be and, even more important, ... groups are best regarded as emerging from or constituted in communication" (Frey, 1999). Communication is a prerequisite for so-called shared cognition in a team. Research has shown that when members of a team have similar ideas and thoughts about the work they do together they are effective, and to develop these shared mental models they need to spend time communicating with each other (DeChurch & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010). A team's communication will also influence and be influenced by the emotional climate in a team, it will affect motivation and cohesion and it will be the origin of conflicts, as well as the means by which conflicts are resolved.

The goal of communication is information transfer. Teams reach this goal to a varying degree at different points in time. What gets in the way of effective communication is what Agazarian, drawing on the work of Shannon and Weaver calls "noise", or entropic communication (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000). The different types of noise are vagueness, redundancy and contradictions (Simon & Agazarian, 2000). If one listens to how a team communicates, one may be able to tentatively establish which developmental phase the team is in. Criteria for establishing a group's developmental phase by listening to and observing its communication are the amount and type of noise. Early in a group's life the communication will be characterised by vagueness, later by contradictions, and later still when the group has developed there will be less noise and more information transfer (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000 and Gantt & Agazarian, 2004).

The tendency in a team that is in the first phase, Dependency and inclusion, is to create a centralised communication structure. That means that most of the communication goes to, from and through the leader. The leader becomes the coordinator of the communication and is expected to structure the communication by deciding who talks when. Another sign in the communication that a team is in phase one is that the communication is vague. Members are likely to speculate, avoid making clear proposals or express clear opinions. It is also common for members to talk about personal matters or matters not related to

the team's work rather than about the task at hand. Inputs from members are rarely integrated and are often more or less ignored.

In the second phase, Counter-dependency and fight, when differences have begun to surface and members start to attempt to reclaim their authority, the communication will be characterised by the team's trying to deal with differences by fighting them. If one listens to the team now one will hear contradictions, complaining, leading and rhetorical questions, criticism and "Yes, but's". These communication patterns are a sign that information very possibly hasn't come across from the sender to the receiver. Prolonged complaining in a team not only blocks information transfer but eventually also leads to a passive team climate and low effectiveness (Lehmann-Willenbrock, Meyers, Kauffeld, Neining & Henschel, 2011).

After the team has had some experience with resolving their differences and handling conflict, one may hear more of the relationship building and relationship sustaining communication that is one characteristic of this phase. In the third phase, Trust and structure, more appreciative statements, more expressions of positive emotion and more personally meaningful information start to appear. The team needs to pay attention to the balance between communication focused on relationships and communication focused on the task and to make sure that they lose sight of neither.

Finally, in the fourth phase, Work and productivity, a group really starts to focus on work and therefore one will hear work-related statements being made more often. One will also hear data, facts, suggestions, instructions, summaries, reflections, questions, confirmations and members building on other members' input. The team will now be able to explore a question and follow a line of thought for a longer time by building on each-other's inputs.

The prevalent communication pattern in a team at a given point in time is thus a function of the developmental phase that the group is in and at the same time it is true that the phase to a certain degree is a function of the communication pattern. It is an essential part of the roles of team leader and team member to be aware of this as an aspect of the current context and to work to develop functional communication patterns that drive the team's development forward. To know that the communication pattern is a function of the group's development also makes it easier not to personalise problems a group is having with integrating differences. Listening to

communication patterns is a way to see more of the whole context.

Researchers (Lehmann-Willenbrock, Meyers, Kauffeld, Neinger & Henschel, 2011, and Kauffeld & Lehman-Willenbrock, 2012) have also shown the importance of communication and have demonstrated that different kinds of communication influence team effectiveness differently. In short, they have found that – as first Bennis and Shepard (1956), and later Agazarian and Gantt (2000), stated – clear, direct and goal-oriented communication correlates with high productivity, and communication that is coloured by our affective reactions towards differences, authority and interdependence (for example complaining, criticism, contradictions) correlates with low productivity.

Our third underlying assumption was that training participants to discriminate between functional and dysfunctional communication and to see and influence communication patterns will enhance their ability to exert their leadership in resonance with the context.

### Process and task leadership in teams

We distinguish between process leadership and task leadership in teams. Marks, Mathieu and Zaccaro (2001) define team process as “members' interdependent acts that convert inputs to outcomes through cognitive, verbal, and behavioral activities directed toward organizing task-work to achieve collective goals”. Team processes are the means by which members work interdependently to reach their goals. These same researchers define task work as a team's interactions with tasks and resources for performing the tasks. Task work represents what it is that teams are doing, whereas teamwork or process describes how they are doing it with each other.

Leading task work and leading process work require different skills and behaviours. Both require attention to the larger context. Task leadership entails responsibility for the structural aspects of the team's context. That means clarification of the goal and the agenda, allocation of time for different pieces of work, clarification of roles, time-keeping, summarising and checking for consensus when the team seems to have reached an agreement, and clarification of decisions.

Taking up the task leader role requires close attention to the group's current position in relation to its goal and in relation to its time frame. Is the group approaching or moving away from

its goal? Is there time to slow down to go deeper into an issue or does the team need to speed up to complete its task before the time limit? It also requires active leadership interventions to guide the group back to their path to the goal when they seem to be moving away from it. The task leader must also pay close attention to the information processing and decision making in the group so that he or she can determine when the group has integrated differences and reached agreement (i.e. is approaching its goals) and is ready to move on. It is a role that requires being in tune with the current and continually changing context.

Process leadership entails monitoring the communication and intervening if there is too much “noise” so the team can self-correct and apply a more functional communication pattern. A second task is to keep an eye on the emotional climate and intervene when needed. Process leadership requires close attention to communication patterns and sequences, tone of voice, members' reactions and so on.

Process leadership also entails supporting the team's natural tendency to alternate between episodes of active performance and episodes of transition during which they reflect, evaluate and plan (Marks et al., 2001). A method for supporting this reflection is what is often referred to as “debrief” in the research literature (Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013) Debrief in this context is an evaluation of the team process. For a group to be able to self-correct it needs relevant and reality-based feedback. It also needs a structure that helps it process this feedback and use it for strategic planning. During episodes of active performance, members need to observe or monitor teamwork and collect data for the evaluation of teamwork that is to take place during the transition episode. Teams that do this well create feedback loops that help them continually self-correct and develop their effectiveness.

A team debrief should focus on teamwork rather than the results, process rather than outcome. The team should not try to answer the question “Did we make the right decision in this set of circumstances?” but instead the question “Did we make the decision right, using processes that across different circumstances increase our odds of success?” (Smith-Jentsch, Cannon-Bowers, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 2008). A team debrief should look at how the team communicated, coordinated its work, how members backed each other up, gathered information and made decisions with the goal of doing all these things better in the future.

In our leadership training the debrief format is a force field analysis. The force field analysis (Lewin, 1951) is a method for identifying driving and restraining forces in relation to a goal. The driving forces are all the variables, inside and outside the team, that facilitate movement towards a goal. The restraining forces are all the variables that get in the way of the team approaching its goals. Yvonne Agazarian has adapted Lewin's force field to the phases of group development; Agazarian identified the driving and restraining forces for system development specific to each phase and its developmental goal (Gantt & Agazarian, 2007). Each developmental phase has its typical driving and restraining forces. Driving forces potentiate and restraining forces obstruct group development. Identifying the balance of driving and restraining forces in each phase of development provides a useful map to guide change strategies to weaken the restraining forces.

When the team has produced a force field it studies it to see what it tells them about the team's developmental phase and to see which of the restraining forces would be easiest to reduce or weaken. The team then sets up a plan for how to weaken the restraining forces that they have identified as the easiest. The idea that it is better to reduce the restraining forces that are easiest first is based on the idea that this requires the least effort and is the quickest way to free up energy. When the team has weakened the easiest restraining force, it will have a little more energy available and can then start working on the second easiest one.

Our fourth underlying assumption was that discriminating basic aspects of leadership and letting participants practise leader roles formed around these aspects will enhance a participant's ability to exert leadership in resonance with the team context.

## Methods for training context awareness

### Functional subgrouping

In our leader development programmes, we use functional subgrouping as a communication technique when the whole group of participants reflect together over theory or experience. Functional subgrouping is a method originally created for conflict resolution by Yvonne Agazarian (Gantt & Agazarian, 2004). The method builds on the assumption that groups develop

through discriminating and integrating differences. It helps teams work with the natural human tendency to react to and dislike differences that are too big and to see the new and unexpected as a threat.

Functional subgrouping structures communication in a way that supports participation, prevents contradictions, clarifies similarities and differences while making differences tolerable. Functional subgrouping is introduced in a group by inviting the members to finish every input by saying "anyone else?" This way it is made clear to everyone in the group that the speaker has finished and that she or he wants whoever speaks next to build on what has been said with something that is similar.

The next speaker is then invited to first paraphrase what has been said, check if he or she has captured the message (both content and feeling) and then add his or her own contribution. More people come in, reflect the person before them and add their version. A subgroup is formed. This subgroup is built on similarity in content and emotional tone, and works to explore this similarity. When the subgroup has finished exploring, the members holding a different point of view are invited to form a subgroup and do the same work. The subgroups do important work for the whole group in that they clarify and explore a similarity and discriminate and contain differences for the group (Gantt & Agazarian, 2007).

In functional subgrouping, differences are considered information and fuel for the group and as potentially useful in a group's development. In fact, when a group uses functional subgrouping as a communication technique it supports the discrimination and integration of differences. The subgroups' task is to explore the differences and subgroups dissolve when this work is done and the differences have been integrated in the whole group. When a subgroup is working, its members will eventually discover small differences in what at first seemed just similar. When subgroups listen to each other, members will eventually discover similarities in what at first seemed only different. This is integration.

Functional subgrouping interrupts our impulse to talk to the difference. This reduces the amount of reactivity in the group. Members are less likely to react to and be frustrated by differences and attempts at converting the difference. Members will have more access to the problem-solving and reality-testing parts of their brains. When other members paraphrase what we said

it gives us proof that we are heard and that our information is being integrated and when members build on each-other's inputs it creates an environment of similarity where members can feel safe and are more likely to open up to small differences.

As described earlier, the technique is to paraphrase and then build on others' inputs and to say "anyone else?" after an input. It fosters a decentralised communication structure since the technique doesn't require the leader to decide who speaks when. In functional subgrouping the inputs are more strongly connected simply because a prerequisite for a paraphrase is a true understanding of what has been said. Another thing that promotes this connection between inputs is that what follows the paraphrase is a build with a lot of similarity in it that makes it easy to integrate and a slight and tolerable difference that is the development. The group thus establishes a pace at which it can continually integrate small differences, i.e. new information.

To be able to subgroup, members must pay attention to the communication, the content and the tone. They must listen to other members and pay attention to their own thoughts and feelings to know if they have a similarity that they want to bring into the group. They must look for signs that they are really reflecting the content and feeling as well as intention of the person whose input they are paraphrasing and be prepared to try again if they did not get it right. They must be willing to stand up for their input and demand to have it paraphrased in a way they feel does it justice so that the information is not lost to the group. They must be willing to help members who are trying, but not yet succeeding in paraphrasing their input. It requires attention to the whole communication process and broadens the perspective to include the whole group, the communication pattern and longer communication sequences. Simply put, it makes you see more of the context.

### **Experience-based learning of team development**

As mentioned earlier, the different developmental phases that all groups go through each have their own characteristic communication pattern (Agazarian, 2007). We strive to give participants an experience of these typical communication patterns. We divide the group of participants into two smaller groups and give them a task to solve. The members of these

groups are assigned a communication category drawing from the SAVI taxonomi of communication (Simon & Agazarian, 2004 and Benjamin, Yeager & Simon, 2012) which discriminate between which types of communications are likely to be driving toward the goal of communication and which constitute noise and are likely to be restraining (Simon & Agazarian, 2004) (for example complaining, self-defence, sarcasm and blaming that are likely to be restraining, or open or closed questions, general information and facts and figures that, depending on the context, are more likely to be driving). During the group's task work, everything the members say must fit into the assigned category. The communication categories that are assigned for each group to use are put together to form the typical pattern of each developmental phase. The groups work in four rounds, each round representing one of the four developmental phases, in the order that the phases occur. When one group is working, the other group observes. The groups then change places and the group that worked gets to observe the other group. Both groups do all four phases and observe the other group do all four phases. Between rounds, both groups reflect upon what they observed as a group was working. What did the observing group see? What does the observing group think about the working group's chances of success? What did the working group observe? How productive did they find the group? What was the emotional climate? What was it like to be the leader in the group and what was it like to be a member? And perhaps the most important question – how did the communication pattern affect each member? The participants get a chance to reflect upon what the communication pattern triggered in them, what thoughts, feelings and impulses surfaced and what their communication style triggered in others. Often participants see the difference between communication patterns and people, and understand that if they themselves can change their communication patterns that will affect the communication pattern in the group, and that in turn will affect the relationships and – of course – group productivity.

The observations that are made between rounds invariably reflect the theoretical description of group development (e.g. the IMGD). The participants thus get an experience – albeit brief – of the different phases and a sense of their universality. They get to know something about how the phases affect people. Often participants get angry or disheartened even



though they are fully aware that the groups are construed for the sake of illustration and will be dissolved in a matter of minutes. They can also be swept away by the feeling of intimacy and enchantment that often emerges in round three, even though they know that this is role-play. It is an opportunity to experientially learn about the meaning of context.

### **Practising the observer, process leader and task leader roles**

We train participants to first observe and later to intervene in and give feedback to a group about its work processes. Participants work together in smaller groups and take up different roles such as coach, observer and coachee, and later the roles of task leader, process leader and member. This is a way to highlight the role concept. Changing roles frequently and in a setting where observation and reflection are part of the methodology highlights the importance of paying attention to role shifts and the challenges in those role shifts. In our experience, it is in the observer role and the process leader role that participants learn the most about working relationships, team processes and leader-member exchange. In the observer role, the very first thing that is a challenge to the participants is to be quiet and look and listen. The impulse to always act is so strong. The second challenge is to pay less attention to what is said and more attention to how the (role) relationship and the collaboration are developing. Eventually, participants become more interested in how the coach and coachee are managing to develop a problem-solving work process together than in the actual solutions to the coachee's problem. After the coaching "session", the three debrief together and the observer brings in his or her observations of the work process (which is different from feedback to the individuals).

When participants have practised the observer role, we introduce the process leader and task leader roles. These two leader roles both contain the behaviours of the observer role. Observing and monitoring processes are basic skills in leader roles. The structure for practising the two leader roles is groups of four to six participants who are given a task and who appoint a process leader and task leader from amongst themselves. The task that the groups are given is neither of vital importance to the group nor very difficult at this point. The groups need to handle the complexity of practising new roles, monitoring

the work process while working *and* performing a task (or a task within a task). The groups are instructed to stop half way through the assigned time (time allocation, pacing and time keeping is part of the task leader role) to do a debrief using the format of the force-field, led by the process leader. After this, they go back to task work and after they have finished they debrief (led by the process leader) once more. Leading the team in identifying the developmental phase and setting up a plan for how to reduce the restraining forces is also the responsibility of the process leader. After this, we gather the groups and debrief together, using functional subgrouping to share what has been learned, satisfactions, dissatisfactions and discoveries.

The two leader roles that are practised in our leadership training encompass tasks and behaviours that are usually performed by one person. As is clearly illustrated above, each role is in itself highly complex. Put together into one role, the complexity is even greater. Dividing the different aspects of the leader role, task and process makes it easier to practise, observe and evaluate the inherent behaviours. At the same time, making the tasks of the roles explicit is also quite humbling. Taking on the responsibility for monitoring and intervening in the process or keeping and pacing the team on its path to its goal might be experienced as more challenging in the moment than taking on a more vaguely defined leader role, precisely because it is easier to observe and evaluate. If the challenge in the observer role seems to be to stay quiet and just observe, the challenge in the process leader role often seems to be to trust one's perceptions and to step forward and intervene, i.e. take up leadership. The training provides opportunities to explore the driving and restraining forces one has in relation to these different aspects of leadership.

## **Outcomes**

We built our leadership training on four underlying assumptions and designed the training accordingly. The question is – did the training improve the participants' ability to exert their leadership in resonance with the context?

We had several sources of information about the outcome of the leadership training:

- Participants summarising and describing what they had learned.
- Participants sharing new experiences from implementing what they had learned and

changing behaviour to more adaptive leadership behaviour.

- Follow-up meetings with participants and their managers concerning goal fulfilment.

- Participant surveys.

Here we present the participants' own statements, which we have linked to each underlying assumption.

Our first underlying assumption was: training participants to pay close attention to the different roles they have in different contexts and to the different goals those contexts and thereby those roles have will enhance their ability to exert their leadership in resonance with the context.

It seems that the concept of role, goal and context was the part of the training that made the strongest impression on the participants and that using it did enhance their ability to lead in resonance with the context.

*"A common problem with leaders is that we think it is obvious what everyone should do. But sometimes you need to step back and think. What roles are necessary? What is our common goal? You may need to slow down and give some issues more time and make a role description for each role so that every individual feels they are contributing and feels motivated."*

*"Insight about the difference between role and person, how roles differ in different contexts."*

*"I'm using the role-goal-context model together with my team when we work with the challenging difference between role and person."*

*"We started our new project teams with a specified goal, defined goals and a common planning horizon."*

*"I'll turn to my manager to clarify my role and the goals of my teams so that I can communicate and visualise the goals to my team."*

Our second assumption was: training participants in tracking a group's development and establishing its current developmental phase enhances their context awareness and ability to exert leadership in resonance with the current context.

The participants seem to have achieved an enhanced awareness of the developmental phase as a crucial part of the context and how the leader role changes with phase development.

*"Learning and experiencing group development really helped me be patient with my group. And when I communicate, I really try to build on others' communication. I'm not that good at it yet, but I'm trying hard!"*

*"I realised that I need to adapt my behaviour to my team."*

*"I'm closer to my team members now, more present and less distant."*

*"Balance and timing – communicating what and when."*

Our third underlying assumption was: if participants learn to discriminate between functional and dysfunctional communication and to see and influence communication patterns this will enhance their ability to exert their leadership in resonance with the context.

Participants seem to have changed their behaviour most significantly when it comes to communication. They have improved their own communication skills and started seeing it as a team process, connected to phase and a part of the context that influences people's behaviour. It has helped them see communication patterns rather than people and how they can intervene in these patterns.

*"Learned to listen and to open up to other perspectives – new information."*

*"She communicates more clearly and distinctly. As her manager, I can observe this and I can also see that her team meetings are much more effective now. The team has improved its decision making."*

*"I've improved the way I give feedback. I prepare myself much more and I'm aware of how I communicate. When we have differences that are too big, I try to find similarities first."*

*"I realised how we mind-read, and how we can differentiate between mind-reads and reality."*

*"I make true efforts to communicate more clearly and avoid vagueness and lack of clarity."*

Our fourth assumption was: discriminating basic aspects of leadership and letting participants practise leader roles formed around these aspects will enhance participants' ability to exert leadership in resonance with the team context.

This is the assumption that generated the least amount of support. This may be due to the fact that the two leadership roles, task- and process leader, are based on the three concepts mentioned above of role, goal and context, team development and communication. What participants learned from experiences with these roles are described in the quotes above. The first two quotes below, however, illustrate insights related to the task leader role, while the third relates to the process leader role.

*"Structure provides calm."*

*"I've decided that I'll actually meet my team. I'm setting up periodic meetings so we can meet, discuss and actually work together."*

*"The importance of establishing a good and supportive communication"*

All the underlying assumptions were connected to context awareness, and there are signs that participants have developed this skill.

*"I'm a part of the organisation now."*

*"I've learned that if you step aside for a moment and observe the group, you always find a way out, even at times when it looks hopeless."*

*"I'm more patient and calm now instead of just rushing in to things. I think before I act. I don't even have to act every time."*

*"Staying calm and being present despite uncertainty"*

We assume that a prerequisite for context awareness is observation and mindful reflection.

*"I've learned to balance receptiveness with action."*

*"The importance of reflection, also reflect over the goals, what do they mean – really mean?"*

*"The benefits of thoughtfulness"*

As leaders of the training programmes we have also observed behaviour changes in our participants.

Participants showed increased ability to:

- Communicate, e.g. listening actively, joining, building, summarising and paraphrasing
- Observe and give feedback about communication such as contradictions, vagueness and redundancy
- Meta-communicate, i.e. communicate about the communication
- Identify group phases and see their own and others' behaviour in that context
- Take up the role of participant and take up more and more of the responsibility and leadership of the training
- Clarify goals
- Commit to an action plan

In participant surveys, one of the questions that got the highest score of all was, "Will you do things differently as a result of what you learned?"

## Summary and discussion

Our strongest insight is the importance of observation. Many leaders have little practice in observing how their team is performing and communicating, the impact of their own behaviour on others, and vice versa. Observation, followed by reflection, gives the participant information about the context, the communication and the group processes, and it also gives the participant's brain some useful milliseconds to move from the amygdala to the frontal lobes – from just reacting to behaviour based on good judgement in line with role, goal and context.

Observation enhances the ability to make better judgements and decisions about how to intervene as a leader, when and how to step forward and when and how to step back. Observation also gave the participants the insight that processes take time, the "noble art of waiting" instead of acting or reacting. If one observes or monitors team processes it is also easier to adapt the level of activity. Some research (Barling, 2014) indicates that very active extrovert leadership behaviour decreases active followership behaviour.

The importance of clear goals was new knowledge to several participants. Many of them realised that their own goals were unclear, and goal clarification was an important next step. They also realised that goals should be aligned, from one hierarchical level to the next, and that goals need to be worked with continuously to remain powerful. Some participants at first assumed that the team members had to be controlled and "governed". They then discovered the importance of a leadership close to the team, team leadership.

Reflections and insights probably, but not necessarily, lead to a more adaptive behaviour. However, the participants – and their managers – describe behaviour changes. The participants also give feedback to other participants that they have developed a more adaptive leadership behaviour after the training.

Our conclusion is that the design of the training programme improved the participants' leadership. However, this is not a research project. Research is needed to establish the effect and usefulness of different training designs.

Tools need to be implemented in resonance with the context. Building on Agazarian's hypothesis that many of the difficulties human beings face are related to our self-centeredness (Agazarian, 2000), we suggest that at the core of all organisational problems is self-centeredness and a lack of context awareness, since this naturally limits our perspective. Systematically training context awareness would then not only give us a sense of belonging and meaning, but also provide a better basis for decisions and actions.

A few final remarks about "tools". Firstly – even if our primary goal is to enhance context awareness, as is evident in our description of the training, we also provide several leadership tools. We teach communication techniques that help people handle contradictions and complaints (their own and others'), goal and role clarification tools, debrief structures such

as, for example, the force field analysis, and so on. Secondly – managers usually have access to a lot of tools in their organisations already – performance management processes, role descriptions, vision statements, work process descriptions etc. It is often not a lack of tools that is the problem, but a lack of clarity as to when and how to use them so they trigger follower behaviour. Thirdly – when participants start paying attention to the context (when they start to track communication patterns and

group processes) they very often know exactly what to do. They have their own leadership tools and know how to use them. When they follow the group process (“go with the flow” as our participant wrote in her project report) they will eventually come across the trigger, the event in the team that triggers and guides their leader behaviour. What they do in that moment will be a result of the team process as well as their own inherent leadership.

## References

- Agazarian, Y.M. (1997). *Systems-centered therapy for groups*. New York, NY: Guilford. Reprinted in paperback (2004). London, UK: Karnac Books.
- Agazarian, Y.M., & Gantt, S.P. (2000). *Autobiography of a theory: Developing a theory of living human systems and its systems-centered practice*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- Avolio, B. J., Reichard, R. J., Hannah, S. T., Walumbwa, F. O., & Chan, A. (2009). A Meta-analytic review of leadership impact research: Experimental and quasi-experimental studies. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20, 764-784.
- Barling, J (2014) *The science of leadership*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Bennis, W. G., & Shepard, H. A. (1956). A Theory of Group Development. *Human Relations* 9: 415-37.
- Benjamin, B.E., Yeager, A. & Simon, A. (2012). *Conversation transformation: Recognize and overcome the 6 most destructive communication patterns*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Carsten, M.K., & Uhl-Bien, M. (2012). Follower beliefs in the co-production of leadership: Examining upward communication and the moderating role of context. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 220 (4), 221-230.
- Day, D.V., Harrison, M.M., & Halpin, S.M. (2009). *An integrative approach to approach to leader development, connecting adult development, identity, and expertise*. Taylor and Francis Group, NY.
- DeChurch, L. A., & Mesmer-Magnus, J.R. (2010). The cognitive underpinnings of effective teamwork: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95, 32-53.
- Frey, L.R. (1999). Introduction. In L.R. Frey, D.S. Gouran, & M.S. Poole (Eds), *The handbook of group communication theory and research* (p. ix). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gantt, S.P. (2005). Functional role-taking in organizations and work groups. *Group Psychologist (APA Division 49 newsletter)*, 15(5), 15.
- Gantt, S.P., & Agazarian, Y.M. (2004). Systems-centered emotional intelligence: Beyond individual systems to organizational systems. *Organizational Analysis*, 12 (2), 147-169
- Gantt, S.P., & Agazarian, Y.M. (2005). Introduction. In Gantt, S.P., & Agazarian, Y.M. (Eds), *SCT in action: Applying the systems-centered approach in organizations*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse. Reprint (2006). London, UK: Karnac Books.
- Gantt, S.P. & Agazarian, Y.M. (2007). Phases of System Development in Organizational Work groups: The Systems-Centered Approach for Intervening in Context. *Organizational & Social Dynamics* 7(2) 253–291
- Hackman, J.R. (2002). *Leading teams, setting the stage for great performances*, Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, Boston, MA.
- Kauffeld, S. & Lehmann-Willenbrock, N. (2012). Meetings matter: Effects of team meetings on team and organizational success. *Small Group Research*, 43: 130-158.
- Klein, C., DiazGranados, D., Salas, E., Le, H., Burke, C. S., & Lyons, R. (2009). Does team building work? *Small Group Research*, 40, 181-222.
- Lacerenza, C. N., Reyes, D. L., Marlow, S. L., Joseph, D. L., & Salas, E. (2017). Leadership Training Design, Delivery, and Implementation: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/apl0000241>
- Lehmann-Willenbrock, N. Meyers, R. A., Kauffeld, S., Neining, A., & Henschel, A. (2011). Verbal Interaction Sequences and Group Mood: Exploring the Role of Team Planning Communication. *Small Group Research* 42: 639.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science*. New York, Harper and Row.

- Locke, E.A. & Latham, G.P. (1990). *A theory of goal setting and task performance*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Marks M.A., Mathieu J.E., & Zaccaro S.J. (2001). A temporally based framework and taxonomy of team processes. *Academy of Management Review*, 26, 356–376.
- Simon A, & Agazarian, Y. M. (2000). SAVI — the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction, in *The Process of Group Psychotherapy: Systems for Analyzing Change*, Beck, A. P. & Lewis, C. M. (Eds), Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Assn, 357–380
- Smith-Jentsch, K.A., Cannon-Bowers, J. A., Tannenbaum, S. I., & Salas, E. (2008). Guided team self-correction: Impacts on team mental models, processes, and effectiveness. *Small Group Research* 2008; 39; 303
- Tannenbaum, S.I., & Cerasoli, C.P. (2013). Do team and individual debriefs enhance performance? A meta-analysis. *Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society*, 55, 231-245.
- Uhl-Bien, M., Riggio, R. E., Lowe, K. B., Melissa K., & Carsten, M. K. (2014). Followership theory: A review and research agenda. *The Leadership Quarterly* 25, 83–104
- Van Vugt, M. & Ahuja. A. (2010). *Selected: Why some lead, why others follow, and why it matters*. London: Profile/New York: Harper Collins/Toronto: Random House
- Wheelan, S. A. (2005). *Group processes, a developmental perspective*. Allyn and Bacon, Boston, Massachusetts.