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The Deep Blue Sea-An Introduction to and Appraisal of Wilfred Drath's
Conception of Leadership
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Abstract

Wilfred H. Drath advances a principle of relational dialogue as the basis for leadership in The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership (Drath, 2001). Drath suggests that this principle of relational leadership evolves from two other leadership principles--personal dominance and interpersonal influence. Drath utilizes a fictitious case study of the Zoffner Piano company to illustrate how these three principles appear in ordinary organizational life. Drath focuses on exploring the source of how we think about and view leadership. This paper provides an overview of Drath's viewpoints and provides an appraisal of the value of his work.

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"Leadership happens when a conversation across worldviews makes sense of a new subject." (Drath, 2001, p. 144) This sentence encapsulates much of what Wilfred Drath is advancing in The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership (Drath, 2001). Drath exhorts us to look at the creation of leadership as an endeavor which 1) arises out of our relational dialogues with each other, 2) is built on shared meaning-making and 3) is conscious of the

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ever-widening contexts in which leadership operates and in which we live. The simple statement at the beginning of the paragraph may be recognized for its critical characteristics.

First, a conversation connotes an exchange, a dialogue-not a unidirectional activity. Second, the idea that the conversation takes place across worldviews points us toward the tension between absolute and relative positions and acknowledges that each one of us comes from a particular perspective. We would be wise to recognize the frame of reference or the lens through which both we and those we relate to are looking. Third, the idea that the conversation serves as a bridge across worldviews should not be lost. Fourth, the idea of a joint "sense-making" points us toward the central role of leadership as movement toward the future-as bringing new things into being.

Drath pushes us to consider both the way that we understand leadership and then what our understandings of leadership mean in practical terms. The focus of this paper is to outline what and how Drath puts his argument forward. It will be left to others on the panel to discuss the merits of the position he advances¹. So if we view this initial statement as Drath's endpoint, let us now work backwards and review the path he takes to reach his conclusions. My own evaluation of Drath's work is presented in conclusion.

Drath's Multi-level Approach

The Deep Blue Sea is held together by selected excerpts from an organizational case study about the "Zoffner Piano Company" (a fictitious name). The story of Zoffner Piano is an all too familiar story of a small, family run, hand crafted piano business, trying to compete in a global environment and with emerging technology. The key features of the story are 1) the transition of leadership from father and founder to MBA daughter (which in itself is an interesting gender issue), 2) the movement to incorporate new technology (digital pianos), and 3) leadership issues embedded in the changing organizational culture, centered around the development of organizational sub-cultures and how to best span those. The concepts in the book are anchored around the daughter's struggle to develop her own leadership style and mark within the company, while her father's shadow stands in the background.

This story-unfolding device allows Drath to cleverly weave together several different strands. First, he uses the transitions of leadership style within Zoffner as a foil to trace the development of leadership theory itself. He describes this evolution of thought about leadership as a movement through three principles: personal dominance (somewhat related to trait theory), interpersonal influence (somewhat related to the behavioral and situational leadership schools of thought) and relational dialogue (the advancement of what I view as a phenomenological and social constructivist theory of leadership). Each of these principles will be described in more detail below.

On a second level, Drath is tracing the organizational stages of growth common to many companies that go through the transition and succession issues from the original founders to second and third generation growth. This is clearly not the explicit focus of the book, but the imaginative reader is able to make a great number of connections in this regard. Closely related to this are the developmental challenges and struggles of the individual leader and how these are faced. This includes some thought-provoking images as to how one's own leadership style is shaped and changed.

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Third, the last story line has to do with the evolution of the global context for leadership that touches most companies today. If organizations are to be successful in today's environment, different worldviews will be encountered. Again, this is a theme that operates on several levels. Not only is Drath talking literally about different national cultures and philosophical/religious world views, he is talking about the different worldviews present in our own community and organizational back yards. The story line pushes us to consider how we deal with differences in a way that is not just culturally relativistic. Taken together, one should be getting the image of a triple or quadruple helix—a series of inter-connected strands woven across levels of increasing size and complexity—but the strands are always being connected from one level to another. Each of these story lines will be expanded in more depth now.

Separating the Strands of Drath's work

Three principles of Leadership. The central thesis Drath is trying to rebut is the notion that "leadership is something leaders possess as an individual attribute" (2001, p. xiv). Perhaps, it is more accurate to say that he is trying to expand the concept of leadership to go beyond this definition, to incorporate reference to both the character and the skill of the individual and the whole system of relations (p. xv). Drath is advancing an understanding of leadership based on a community context. To reach this point, Drath identifies three leadership principles, which seem to be evolutionary in nature, each one in response to the previous level, and more inclusive than the previous level.

Prior to explicating these three principles, it is important to identify the central themes underlying Drath's methodology. First, he places primacy on shared knowledge of leadership—that knowledge we discover only when engaged with others (p. 6). Second, he distinguishes between principles and definitions. Principles are what might be called our mental models, those things we take for granted—almost as articles of faith (p. 7). In contrast, definitions, according to Drath, are subject to debate and scrutiny—or in some respects, subject to disproof in a way that principles are not. Yet, these two concepts are closely linked, because I suspect that Drath would argue that at times we disagree over definitions because we have not fully understood or appreciate the "principle worldview" of the individual(s) with whom we are engaged in discussion (p. 9). With these preliminary thoughts in mind, we now identify Drath's three leadership principles.

Principle One: Personal Dominance. "Personal dominance is a way of understanding leadership as the personal quality or characteristic of a certain kind of person called a leader" (p. 13). In this view, the leader as individual, is the source of leadership power. From this vantage point, it is almost as if leadership becomes something that is exercised and happens to people. In the story of Zoffner Piano, the founder Mr. Karl, exemplified this model of leadership, particularly when he described his leadership as pulling people from ahead.

Under this conception, the focus of developing leadership is to find the right individuals (p.34). Personality traits come to the fore, much like the position advocated by the trait theorists. In the person of Mr. Karl, Zoffner's founder, we have the picture of a technically knowledgeable person who had the respect of all his employees and one who literally drove the organization. An organization under this type of leadership depends on these key individuals to articulate a clear vision of where the organization is headed. But even so, Drath notes that there is still a relational dynamic going on here—because such a notion of leadership requires certain expectations on the part of followers (p. 40). This further leads Drath to conclude that "all leadership is shared leadership" (p. 61).

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In this model, the leader is one who first determines what strategy to take with respect to facing organizational challenges and then communicates this strategy outward. Obviously, if the individual is flawed or removed from a situation, a leadership vacuum may be created. Leadership is only as strong as the individual leader. This is the primary limitation of personal dominance, the first principle of leadership. And as seen in the Zoffner story, employees could easily view the transition to his daughter, Elena, as one in which the company would no longer be the same. She just "wasn't Mr. Karl."

Principle Two: Interpersonal Influence. The second leadership principle seems to be based on the application of particular human behavioral skills, all aimed at influencing others to achieve specific goals and objectives. Under this view, a person is deemed to be a leader if he or she is able to achieve a position of influence (p. 14). From this perspective, a leader might be determined by creating a socio-gram and determining from this who on the organizational map has the most reciprocal lines or who the "hub" people might be. The leader changes from being the person who possesses leadership as a personal quality to being the person who possesses the most influence in a community or organization.

What is paramount in the second principle is the ability to persuade others (p. 68). Interpersonal influence recognizes that each person has a particular view of reality. From this perspective, leadership is viewed as the process of negotiating the connections between different views and working them together skillfully enough to develop movement in a concerted directed.

Organizationally, a leader's influence may change because of internal or external events such as market changes, technology changes, and leadership changes. These shifts may both be based on and create changing amounts of influence. Again, one's degree of influence is very much dependent on the expectations and perceptions of followers. This adds to the first principle of leadership the sensitivity that leadership requires the interconnections created between people.

Historically, parallels to this second principle of leadership of leadership may be seen in the situational, contingency and transactional models of leadership. In the Zoffner case, we see this principle played out as Elena tries to negotiate her influence with various key managers within the company. She also begins to develop more employee participation strategies. It is interesting to note that if the culture of the organization has been historically shaped more by the personal dominance paradigm, the introduction of the interpersonal paradigm into the organization may be viewed by some as a lack of leadership.

The leader's job is to reach an amicable negotiation of differences. The second principle has added the importance of at least taking into account the individual differences that exist within any organization and community. It is also possible that problems may now be viewed from multiple perspectives, although at a certain point, a resolution must be negotiated. Disagreement is likely to appear more within this principle. Herein is the potential limitation of this perspective-if a new position needs to be created which is somehow different from the components of the negotiating pieces on the table, this may be difficult to achieve (p. 100). Specifically, a leader may be anchored in a particular worldview. The increasing diversity of organizations, the need to develop more inclusive and complex learning behaviors and cross cultural skills leads Drath to his third leadership principle.

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Principle Three: Relational Dialogue. The third leadership principle, the position from which Drath describes the first two, is anchored on two legs. The first leg is its co-creational nature; dialogue and shared meaning making are critical to this third leadership principle. The second leg is a bridging function, the notion that relational dialogue may help people span the divides of differing perspectives and worldviews (p. 16).

Drath poses the following question as the context for why relational dialogue is needed as a concept: how can people with different worldviews accomplish leadership tasks while holding up their differences and regarding them as being of equal worth? (p. 125) The need for this third principle is occasioned not only by increasing global connections but also the development of philosophical divides at the local level. In addition the complexity of organizations calls forth leadership that is more widely shared.

In contrast to the previous two leadership principles, Drath views the third leadership principle, relational dialogue, as being a work in progress-but well on the way to being demonstrably true. He proposes four key ideas:

1. People Construct Reality through Interaction. People construct a reality through their interactions with each other and through the development of language. "We are who we are not by virtue of simply being someone, but by virtue of being someone in relation to others" (p. 138).
2. Leadership Across Worldviews Requires Relational Dialogue. Implicit in this second "truth-in-the-making" is a key idea. Buying into the notion of relational dialogue is also buying into the idea that there is a certain relativistic or provisional nature of truth that is only held relationally. Stated another way, we do not engage in relational dialogue to create a new overarching worldview, but a greater ability to hold these differences together in a relational fashion (p. 141). This is a very subtle, but critical, point.
3. Leadership Happens when a Conversation Across Worldviews Makes Sense of a New Subject. Drath points to various historical trends in thought or ideas that we normally associate with individuals. Yet, in most cases, those ideas are made possible because individuals have been immersed in dialogue with other individuals. Sometimes, this is not a dramatic shift in thought or change in worldview, but it brings a new perspective into being. To illustrate, Drath's own views are likely the product of dialogues with individuals he has cited in the forward of his book. The relational leader "cannot create leadership, but must be created by this leadership, by the relational dialogue between worldviews" (p. 148).
4. All Leadership is a Process of Shared Meaning Making. By now, this is a common theme because it is carried over from the first two leadership principles. The development of future leadership may take on new directions under this principle. People who would develop their leadership abilities will be compelled to do so by participating relationally with others. Drath acknowledges that we may experience leadership coming from all three principles simultaneously. But leadership interactions will look different to individuals who view them from each of these different principles. In other words, the only way to experience this relational quality as relational quality, according to Drath, is to start with a belief in the third leadership principle, even though all leadership principles should be accorded respect (p. 155).

Identifying Organizational and Individual Leadership Transitions. An additional feature in the text is the issues and illustrations that emerge as a part of the case study presented. Although there is no explicit agenda to do this, this reader is struck by the leadership issues that are posed at both an organizational and individual level.

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Organizational Transitions. The Zoffner piano case provides us with several easily distinguishable organizational transitions faced by companies all the time. For example, the following issues emerge from a variety of organizational transitions.

1. Management Succession and Transitions. How does leadership change from one generation to the next? What happens when a new leader encounters an old culture in an organization? What transpires when a leader whose paradigm is personal dominance hands the baton off to a leader whose paradigm is interpersonal influence or relational dialogue?
2. The Introduction of New Technology. When new technology fundamentally changes a business, what difference do the leadership approaches taken make in the acceptance of that technology? How do leaders effectively engage with each other and their constituencies to absorb changes in the business?
3. Organizational Culture. How is it that leadership fosters or inhibits the development of organizational cultures? What happens when subcultures develop within organizations and how is it that these subcultures relate to each other? What is the role of leadership in changing organizational cultures? How can relational dialogue help us transcend the silo mentalities of many organizations?

Individual Leadership Developmental Thresholds. All the while that Zoffner Piano is adapting and evolving, Mr. Karl's daughter, Elena, is trying to find her way in terms of defining her own leadership style. Interestingly, she does this by reference to her father, the challenges faced in the business environment, her MBA program and the expectations of the employees. In many respects, this individual developmental process is utilized to reinforce Drath's point that leadership is inherently relational and best developed when in dialogue with other members of our respective communities. It also seems that there might be a hint that individual leadership development takes an evolutionary path similar to the historical development of leadership principles that Drath observes. Drath does not address this similarity explicitly. But it is not a great stretch of the imagination to see the parallel nature of these two realms. This takes us to our third point.

Exploring and Bridging Different World Views. A key characteristic of relational dialogue is the notion that this leadership principle is rooted in the relationship of different worldviews. In fact, it seems that the emergence of difference worldviews is a catalyst for the creation of this third leadership principle. In other words, Drath contends that current developments in our lives and the increasingly global character of our daily lives, creates the obsolescence of the first two leadership principles and the need for a new or additional model. There are three distinct contributions that relational dialogue makes.

Awareness of a Perspectival Approach. First, the very methodology that Drath uses causes us to reflect on those principles that we take for granted, and those lenses through which we view the world, sometimes unreflectively. Under the relational dialogue principle, we can more easily declare what our starting point is.

Encouraging dialogue across worldviews. Second, the relational model itself depends on dialogue and shared meaning making. Because, in this view, knowledge is found in shared sense making, and engagement and dialogue are required to create this. In addition, relational dialogue explicitly considers the need to not only understand our own worldview but to understand differing worldviews and create a cross-world view dialogue. In the case of Zoffner Piano, this is exemplified as the need to understand the attitudes and beliefs of the rival subcultures in the organization—those employees committed to the hand crafted piano and

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those committed to moving into the age of digital pianos. It might also be a dialogue between those individuals committed to advocating any of these three leadership principles.

Creating a more inclusive shared "new world view." Third, beyond a "cross-cultural dialogue," it is critical for Drath that leadership means that new knowledge is created. This again has several familiar themes. Leadership is focused on the development of the future, the exploration of the new. The new is also developed not in isolation, but in conversations with others in the community. But there is always an ever-expanding community reference. Drath appears to have a concept in relational dialogue that forces us to keep pushing for a wider and wider definition of community. Finally, leadership is not really recognized until it is recognized socially.

Leadership Principles and Tasks

In concert with the development of these leadership principles, Drath also asserts that there are three fundamental leadership tasks that cut across all of the principles: setting direction, creating and maintaining commitment, and facing adaptive challenges. He further uses these to illustrate how each of these leadership principles might lead to a slightly different understanding or implementation of the task. These tasks are presented early in the text, but may be easier to grasp now that we have outlined the major features of Drath's three leadership principles. These observations are summarized in the text and in the table below (p. 147).

Table 1 - Tasks and Principles

| Tasks/Principles | Personal Dominance | Interpersonal Influence | Relational Dialogue |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Setting Direction | Clear direction based on personal vision | Negotiated between the leader and the group | Direction incorporates and reflects differences |
| Creating Commitment | Loyalty, commitment to the person | Commitment more to the synthesized vision | Commitment to the shared crafting of possibilities |
| Facing Adaptive Challenges | Leader's predisposition to the challenge is key | Success dependent on successfully negotiated influence | Faced by a dialogue across world views |

Drath concludes by making some comments about what organizations could do to move more in the direction of relational dialogue. He notes the tendency of organizations to focus on decision-making, problem solving and goal accomplishment and suggests that organizations and communities would be well served by looking for those issues and challenges that might be better addressed by a dialogical process. We do this by moving more towards an inquiring

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rather than an argumentative mode, toward understanding more than trying to force agreement. "Whenever people talk about something they have experienced with the goal of learning about the other person's experience," we are more likely to see dialogue occurring (p. 161).

Drath believes that by exploring the principle of relational dialogue we will increase our capacity to see how leadership can be developed as a system capacity, as opposed to the development of individual leaders (p. 165). In this way, leadership might be dispersed in the broadest fashion across organizations and communities.

An Appraisal of Drath's Work

We can evaluate Drath's contribution by asking four questions: 1) Does the model presented deliver what it purports to—thinking about the source of leadership? 2) Is what is delivered of value from an analytical and practical standpoint? 3) Is the individual swallowed up in the relational model? 4) Are there any unresolvable issues at the highest worldview level?

Does the model presented deliver what it purports to deliver? The stated purpose of the book is to help us think about the source of leadership. Readers who view life from more of a logical, positivist framework will probably find that the book is weak in terms of delivering what it promises. In a real way, Drath views the source of leadership as buried in the relational character of life. The problem may be with the image or the metaphor that Drath uses. When we hear the word "source" we may be looking for something more concrete than the source that Drath leaves us with. For example, the source of water might be a faucet or a well. There is a certain lack of concreteness, a philosophical abstractness to Drath's contentions that is elusive. In some ways, this is similar to an argument that Nathan Harter makes that in essence we are left with something that is unverifiable. But Drath himself suggests that there are some tenets that just have to be accepted like articles of faith. Is this enough? It would perhaps be better to view these "principles" which Drath enumerates more as alternate worldviews of how leadership emerges rather than as "principles" that can somehow be empirically verified. This leads us to our second question.

Is what is delivered of value from an analytical and practical standpoint? If Drath's work is measured against a standard that places a high value on empirical verification and quantitative data, the book is weak. Empiricists will find it lacking substance. Nevertheless, the book is valuable from several other perspectives. First, it draws attention to what happens in the real world. A leader without relationships is not a leader. A leader who is not able to expand their horizons to ever-widening circles of impact and relationships will ultimately be limited. The failure to develop leadership across different worldviews and cultural relationships will eventually push us toward organizational and global peril. An alternate way to assess the contribution of Drath's work is to ask the question: what would leadership look like if the features Drath describes were absent or ignored? It would, in fact, be impoverished. Perhaps the greatest contribution that Drath makes is to allow us to think about the evolution of leadership theory and to help us understand the inter-connections between the individual, the group and the organization.

Is the individual swallowed up in the relational model? Here, the answer is less clear. On the one hand, leadership may still be vested in an individual, if it has been relationally determined or confirmed. On the other hand, it appears that Drath suggests a movement toward leadership that is more broadly shared in our organizations and communities. But the

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individual still has a role to play-the role is just defined in a relational context. This is an issue that should be explored further. Are you ultimately stuck dealing with only a collection of individual perspectives or is there really an independent or objective reality to things that fall in the realm of "shared meaning?"

Are there unresolved issues at the highest principle level? Drath contends that leading across different world views requires an ability to hold different worldviews as equally worthy. There is clearly the idea present that as our leadership models evolve, we will be able to embrace differences more wholeheartedly. However, there may be situations where we have irreconcilable conflicts-as hard as we might try to work things out relationally. Drath would likely argue that we just have not been able to identify and articulate the next new principle of leadership that will incorporate the three principles he has identified. In this respect, Drath has made a contribution-he has articulated a position with a potentially self-correcting mechanism.

Clearly, there are some limits to the book. First, it requires the reader to "try on" a particular worldview to discover its value. Second, as Drath acknowledges, these are truths-in-the-making. The third principle will likely not be the last principle, because new challenges faced by our communities may help us understand the limitations inherent within the third principle of leadership, relational dialogue,-even if only discovered by participating with each other in constructing our shared reality. On balance, the book makes a significant contribution to the field of leadership studies. People who are unimaginative will not appreciate the book. But the reader who is willing to ask how the results of leadership in the world would be different if Drath's principles were seriously explored and made operational will be richly rewarded. The answers may not be found in the text itself, but rather in real life relational dialogues that the book promotes. In that sense, the source of leadership is in the quest for leadership itself.

Footnote:

1. The paper was presented at the International Leadership Association Conference, November 14, 2002 in a panel with Bethany Godsoe, Nathan Harter and Ronald Heifetz. An appraisal of Drath's work was subsequently added. [\[go back to the text\]](#)

References

Drath, Wilfred H. (2001) The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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