Defining Drath’s Leadership Tasks and Principles: Helping Leaders Articulate Leadership

This blog introduces some literature that may help leaders begin to consider and describe their leadership. I have chosen Drath’s (2001) approach because it describes three common leadership tasks and three broad leadership principles, providing quite a succinct way to recognise and evaluate different styles of organisational leadership. The principles of leadership presented are - Personal Dominance, Interpersonal Influence and Relational Dialogue and they address key leadership tasks of setting direction for the group, creating and maintaining commitment to its purposes, and facing adaptive challenges. The principles span modern and postmodern approaches and the book includes examples of how the ideas play out in practice. I hope you find this overview helpful.

How would you describe your leadership approach?
As a manager or leader, you will be drawing on some theoretical perspective or a combination of perspectives. You may or may not be aware or able to articulate the theoretical basis of your practice. This ability may be influenced by your career path and the kind of access you had to management or leadership background and education. Chances are, you will have also gained some leadership experience through your work with other managers or leaders. This experience will have given you some idea of how to manage or lead; either through exposure to ineffective or effective leadership.

Task: At this point you may wish to take a few moments to jot down some key principles that describe your leadership approach. You may wish to go so far as to note the origins of these principles. Where did you learn them? Why are they particularly meaningful to you?

Why does it matter?
Being able to critique and articulate your leadership approach is an important aspect of effective leadership. Hornstrup et al. (2012) suggest that “a manager or leader without a theoretically sound basis is like a headless person” who runs the risk of “running around aimlessly” (p.x). Having had the misfortune, as a young child, of witnessing a headless chicken running around my neighbours back yard, this image is a little too vivid for me. Nevertheless, it may come close to describing the experience of managers or leaders who have risen through the ranks of organisations or founded businesses with knowledge of their product or craft but without particular knowledge or training in leadership and management.
A manager or leader without a theoretically sound basis is like a headless person who runs the risk of running around aimlessly.

Recently, as an employee of an organisation, I was involved in a series of meetings with a manager. I left each of the meetings feeling unheard, misunderstood and unsettled. It took quite a lot of time and energy to recover from these meetings and the issues did not get resolved.

Keen to understand what was causing the communication issues, at one of the meetings I asked my manager what management approach they drew on. I figured that if I knew the theoretical stance they took, it might give me some clues how to work with them more productively. The manager’s response to my question was, “I do the best I can to support everyone with the resources I have”. I am not sure whether they saw this as an adequate answer to my question, were evading answering it, did not have time to formulate a more considered response, or did not know how to define their theoretical stance. Needless to say, it did not shed any light on my question or help our work together.

Having some framework or approach to make some kind of intellectual sense of my manager’s leadership or management practice may have assisted us to find ways to work together more productively in those meetings. Clearly, we had different ideas about how to relate as manager and employee and these differences went unacknowledged or understood. Sadly, I eventually decided that the emotional and time demands of those unproductive and unsettling meetings were too great and I asked that they be discontinued. Long-story-short, I resigned soon after.

Where do you start to search for leadership theory?

For those who are unfamiliar with leadership theory, the expanse of literature and variety of approaches can be overwhelming and make it difficult to easily find suitable material. When I recently came across the work of Wilfred Drath (2001) it seemed like a helpful way for people to understand different types of leadership and its relevance for different work contexts. Drath describes three principles of Leadership - Personal Dominance, Interpersonal Influence and Relational Dialogue – all of which can accomplish three key leadership tasks - “setting direction for the group, creating and maintaining commitment to its purposes, and facing adaptive challenges” (p.xvii). I particularly like Drath’s ideas because they provide a fairly simple and succinct place to start thinking about leadership theoretically.

If you are interested in understanding and defining your leadership approach and considering it within the context of your organisation, Drath’s book may be a useful guide. He discusses the ways different leadership principles can work well in some situations and create limitations in others. Understanding the different principles and the work they do could assist you to recognise when things aren’t working, consider alternative options, and facilitate effective changes.

Drath believes that a person’s role or personality does not define them as leader or follower. It is the context in which they are working together and the leadership principles they subscribe to that determines their positions. Each leadership principle involves different expectations of leaders and how leadership is defined. Anyone can demonstrate leadership if the conditions are such for this to happen.

The following Table, which I have reproduced from Drath’s book, shows the three leadership principles and their relation to the leadership tasks. I hope that it will help you as leader or manager to gain more understanding of these particular ideas, review them, and identify any relevant areas for
development. The Table is more of a summarised diagrammatic guide and the book elaborates these ideas with examples that will hopefully help you identify and work with the nuances and complexities of your particular organisation.

I have also provided a very brief summary of the ideas to help whet your appetite for the book.

**Leadership tasks**

The three leadership tasks broadly encompass the work of managers and leaders. First, *setting direction*, focuses on looking forward – it is the where, what, why and how questions that relate to the direction of the team or organisation. Second, *creating and maintaining commitment*, addresses the how and what questions that determine cohesiveness, coordination and involvement of people in the team or organisation. It focuses on how people work together to achieve the identified direction. Third, *facing adaptive challenges*, involves managing the challenges that cause confusion, disagreement and uncertainty. It also includes mustering the human and practical resources needed to face these. Drath’s three leadership principles provide different approaches to undertake this work.

**Personal Dominance Principle**

With this principle, the vision and direction are set by the leader and colleagues follow. It is a hierarchal process and command and control style of leadership. Followers are committed to the leader who is seen to possess leadership qualities. This is undermined if followers lose faith or commitment to the leader.

**Interpersonal Influence Principle**

This principle continues to see leadership as an internal quality, possessed by the leader. However, the leader emerges because they have the most influence in a group in a given situation. Direction is no longer determined by the leader, but by their level of influence to meet the identified self-interests of the majority of group members. When there is significant unresolvable difference in the group, this principle is undermined.

**Relational Dialogue Principle**

Relational dialogue is possible when there is a shared commitment for people to work together in an environment where there are differing worldviews that are considered equally worthy and valid. Leadership occurs when people collaborate to make meaning and accomplish tasks. Leadership emerges in the relational process of people working together, rather than viewed as an internal quality of a person. Everyone is involved in leadership development regardless of position in the organisation. When there is an identified leader, they must be committed to embrace conflict, disagreement and diversity and give equal consideration and value to multiple worldviews at all times. This principle is particularly relevant in complex, diverse and dynamic organisations.

In the book, Chapter One gives a longer overview of the tasks and principles and then each is elaborated in more detail in subsequent chapters.

*What was your response to these ideas? Do you have any questions? Would you like to share your comments? I look forward to engaging in further discussion in the comment section below.*

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## Accomplishing the Leadership Tasks with Three Leadership Principles
*(Drath, 2001, Table 5.1, p.153)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ways of Understanding Leadership</th>
<th>Ways of Practicing Leadership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Personal Dominance Principle:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Leadership is a personal endowment of leaders</td>
<td>The leader <em>embodies</em> direction, <em>inspires</em> commitment, and <em>personally</em> faces challenges.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Interpersonal Influence Principle:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Leadership is a process of negotiating social influence</td>
<td>The leader <em>has insight into</em> direction, <em>motivates</em> people to become committed, and <em>facilitates</em> the facing of challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Relational Dialogue Principle:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Leadership is meaning-making in communities of practice</td>
<td>The leader is the <em>central participant</em> in the communal <em>construction of</em> direction, commitment, and facing adaptive challenge. Differences in relative influence are products of the communal construction of the meaning of direction, commitment, and facing adaptive challenge.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominance</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Leadership happens when a leader acts.</td>
<td>- Leadership happens when a person influences others more than he or she is influenced.</td>
<td>- Leadership happens when people make sense together of shared work</td>
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**Table 1: Three Leadership Tasks and Three Leadership Principles**

**References**