Critical Thinking in Groups

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It gladdened my heart when the faculty of organizational leadership at my university agreed to require a course in critical thinking. The evidence had been mounting that one way we could prepare students to participate in leadership without knowing precisely what they would be asked to do in the workplace was to develop their powers of critical thinking. No matter what the world might throw at them, these graduates could cope when the situation turned volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. And, coping when others could not, they were more likely to lead. This was the reasoning behind our decision to require critical thinking.

Ricketts (2005) explored the relationship between leadership development and critical thinking skills. He concluded that leadership educators should teach critical thinking. The following essay suggests that leadership educators build upon this conclusion and consider critical thinking as a group or collaborative activity. By "collaboration" I paraphrase Schrage (1995) to refer to the process of two or more individuals creating a common understanding about a given problem they share. Here is why I believe critical thinking should be collaborative:

- First, in most venues critical thinking already is a collaborative activity, so in preparing students we have to account for that reality.
- Second, groups can afford to learn how to do this better, since collaborative critical thinking should have instrumental value.
- Third, collaborative critical thinking has ethical value because it respects the dignity of each participant.

What I am not claiming s that collaborative learning in the classroom enhances critical thinking skills. That argument has been made already (Cooper, 1995). Instead, I am claiming that there is a qualitatively different kind of critical thinking in the world that takes place in groups and we would be well advised to prepare prospective leaders for that experience.

Critical thinking can be understood as applied philosophy and philosophy has gained a reputation for driving students inward toward acts of reflection and self-

examination. In fact, Paul (1995) has pointed out that philosophy "is largely an individualistic venture" (p. 436). I believe he is correct.

Philosophy appears to emphasize what happens in the individual human mind, where you and I are meant to be autonomous, standing apart from the sway of others. In ordinary speech, we are said to gain critical distance, withdrawing from the press of circumstance to meditate, reflect, and think things through. The Spaniard José Ortega y Gasset (1952, 1957) referred to this mode of being as *ensimismamiento*, a position or point of reference within oneself, over against one's life, almost like a spectator pondering an unfolding drama.

While I endorse the heroism of a reflective mind judging existence in undistracted solitude – whether that ideal is embodied by Immanuel Kant on his daily walks or by Mohandas Gandhi in his musty prison cell – something about the imagery of a lone hero contradicts my own experience, as well as common sense. That is not how most of us work. That is not even how philosophers work. Perhaps in episodes they do, for a moment, but not altogether, not to the exclusion of what Paul (1995) also referred to as philosophy's commitment to dialogue and the sense of community that underlies good thinking. Philosophers do not exist in a vacuum. My students certainly do not. And as prospective leaders, they cannot afford to. Leadership is inherently social.

What my department was asking its faculty to teach is not so much how to operate in isolation – perceiving, thinking, and drawing inferences – but rather how to participate in groups of people attempting to reason together. That is the core competency. It is not just the fact that people do reason together as though it were the background noise to leadership and simply part of a leader's context. Leaders lead in part by leading people through those processes of critical thinking; they help groups make sense of themselves and of their predicaments. That is part of the job.

I am not the first person to have noticed this. Sixteen years ago, Sashkin and Rosenbach (1993) offered what they referred to as a new leadership paradigm in which leaders work with followers to "think and think hard" about the group's vision. Although leaders are expected to model critical thinking on their own, they must also establish the conditions for collaborative thinking, and this includes "developing the followers' cognitive abilities" (p. 97f). Leaders must conduct these collaborations in such a way that the followers participate fully in the process. In other words, leaders take responsibility for collaborative thinking.

During her keynote address to the International Leadership Association several years ago, Wheatley (2002) urged a similar paradigm: "We need to create the conditions where we can think, where we can notice what's going on, and where we develop companions for the work that is required" (p. 3). Weick (2001)

recently put this competency front and center in his own treatment of leadership, recommending that leaders "drop pretense, drop omniscience, drop expert authority, drop a macho posture, and drop monologues" (p. 99).

None of this is meant to suggest that leaders do not have their own critical thinking to do in silence and in solitude. In fact, the new collaborative paradigm actually puts a premium on a leader's interior discipline (Scott, 2001); that is, leadership students will still have to learn how to think as an individual, in private. It is not my purpose here to disavow the individualistic features of critical thinking. Nevertheless, we hear more and more about the need for groups and teams and organizations to share in the activities that were once reserved to managers – critical thinking among them.

Drath (2001) has gone so far as to define leadership in a new way, putting this principle of collaboration at the center. He described as an emerging leadership principle that "leadership happens when people who acknowledge shared work use dialogue and collaborative learning [or] collaborative forms of thought and action" (p. 14f). They face adaptive challenges by reasoning together, in cooperative processes of sense-making. This, to him, is now leadership.

Not coincidentally, the groundswell of interest in collaborative thinking aligns with current understandings about how the mind works. Collaborative thinking is not unusual. So often in life, for example, we offload knowledge and tasks such as calculation to machines, freeing up our minds for other things. We store data in computers, for example, but we also treat other human beings as resources we can turn to for expertise or scraps of information. "Honey, tell me again, who exactly is Paris Hilton?"

I would categorize this utilitarian project of using other people to store and process information within the broader notion that the mind and self is somehow constructed socially, as individuals assimilate social habits and otherwise develop according to that which they share with other people in a process that Mead (1943, 1962) referred to as "the realization of the self in the social situation" (p. 200). But this broad approach to social psychology emphasizes the way in which the mind tends to internalize an external world, whereas the concept of an "extended mind" emphasizes the way in which the mind reverses the process by taking internal functions and delegating them to the external world. In other words, we depend on the social context to help us think.

We actually go about designing entire systems to do our thinking with us. In his recent book Ogle (2007) considers it a good thing that we no longer accept the idea of a "mind inside the head" or MITH. He quotes an unnamed professor of philosophy: "We use intelligence to structure our environment so we can succeed with less intelligence. Our brains make the world smart so that we can be dumb in

peace" (p. 2). In addition, de Bono (1994) insists that the "main purpose of thinking is to abolish thinking" (p. 35). It serves the brain's economy to reject self-reliance as an ideal and embed oneself in a technological and cultural network and let it do a lot of the work.

This temptation to offload critical thinking has made it possible over the years for workers (and ordinary citizens) to let leaders do their critical thinking for them. I suspect followers abdicated responsibility for critical thinking at least as much as leaders took it away from them. That kind of laborious mental work was often left to the boss, somewhere above one's pay grade. Doing so was probably perceived to be the smart move. Thus, critical thinking fell upon the shoulders of leaders as more of an individual chore. For this reason, it would have made sense to teach critical thinking largely as a solitary pursuit.

What I have learned is that the notion of an "extended mind" actually cuts the other way. Rather than justifying that leaders operate in isolation, assuming the burden of critical thinking heroically for everyone else, these findings suggest that leaders would be just as prudent to turn around and rely on the "extended mind" represented by customers, colleagues, and co-workers. Leaders are also embedded in a network that would be foolish to ignore. Better to draw on the greater intellectual resources of the group and use the minds surrounding you.

Simon (1981) and others studying organizational behavior point to the limits of our ability to think instrumentally about most of the urgent, large-scale problems we face. No one person, no matter how brilliant, can know enough and think rigorously enough to solve all of our problems. A wise leader will recognize his or her constraints. In fact, even if we combine all of our intellects the whole world over we are still bounded. That is in part because some problems are simply intractable, yet even minor troubles can exceed our powers. In the teeth of situations that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous we must call upon everyone and as they say "get our heads together."

Further, the very fact that we trust the network to sustain us and keep us from having to think too much places us under an obligation to check periodically how we are using that network. We are to be its masters. Unfortunately, it becomes easier and easier to rely upon the extended mind, to the point of becoming its dependent – doing what we are told, relying on what we hear. An overreliance on the extended mind can encourage laziness. Yet somebody surely has to develop, monitor, and correct these human systems. Why not leadership students?

Over 40 years ago, Drucker (1967) drew attention to this task of system oversight when he wrote that our systems are supposedly designed to serve our needs. They are there to carry out work for us. If we do it right, we design them to lack discretion. We would like for them to stand by, ready to do our bidding, as though

automatic. The system should be, in his words, a total moron. "The stupider the tool," he wrote, "the brighter the master has to be" (p. 174). It takes a heap of critical thinking to build and maintain such a stupid/smart system, the purpose of which is to think for us. And this is not the paradox it appears to be, for it underlies the whole engineering profession, which bends itself to bringing forth systems everyone else can use with confidence and ease. Invest time and energy up front so folks can save time and energy later.

The issue now is that people are taking collective responsibility for some of these systems, especially for the social systems in our communities and at work. The human organization is not the same as a punch press or online search engine most of us can take for granted and leave for the experts to worry about. The human organization is by its nature a collective enterprise requiring communication, coordination, and frequent adaptation to changing conditions. On these grounds, collaborative thinking has *instrumental* value and should be taught for that reason alone.

There is another reason, however. Collaborative thinking has instrumental value, for sure – increasing the quality of our decisions and cultivating that "extended mind" on which we all rely. Collaborative thinking has an additional merit. It respects the dignity of each participant to whatever extent he or she can flourish as a rational being. In other words, collaborative thinking has *ethical* value.

Good leadership is good because it accomplishes something in the world, though it is also good because it recognizes an individual's autonomy. Everyone has a stake in the organizations to which he or she belongs. Collaborative critical thinking in a group acknowledges that fact. It tends to reflect the Kantian principle of treating each human being as a rational agent (Price, 2008). Leadership educators who prepare the next generation for this activity will not only confer a benefit on society tomorrow, but also instill a core value today about the worth of each participant.

For recent ideas about teaching critical thinking as a collaborative activity see Jameson (2009). On assessing these activities specifically see Schamber and Mahoney (2006) as well as Angelo and Cross (1995) more generally.

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