4 ENGAGING CO-WORKERS IN RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Now that we know how relational coordination and coproduction work, the question arises—What is the role of leadership? We know from decades of research that leadership is instrumental in achieving organizational change, whether through the exercise of power or through the exercise of influence. Using influence rather than power requires articulating a vision that others want to achieve. As Nick Turner, president of the Vera Institute of Justice, pointed out, "If the leader is the only one with the vision, there is no vision."[1] Many organizations are now seeking leadership that goes beyond command and control, and beyond the single heroic or charismatic leader, to achieve a broader, more inclusive process.

In this chapter we explore relational leadership as a process of reciprocal interrelating between leaders and those they lead.[2] Relational leadership creates influence in two ways: by developing shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect *with* others—and by developing shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect *among* others.

Though I was unaware of it at the time, my journey toward understanding relational leadership began when I was observing flight departures and discovering relational coordination. At the time, many scholars and practitioners were arguing that to achieve employee empowerment, organizations had to reduce the number of supervisors to prevent them from getting in the way—taking out unnecessary layers of the organization to allow a more direct connection between frontline workers and top management.[3] Relational coordination looked a lot like employee empowerment to me. So I expected there would be less need for supervisors in airlines with high relational coordination and more need for supervisors in airlines with low relational coordination.

But I found the reverse. In fact, I found that having a large number of supervisors relative to frontline workers predicted higher performance—better quality, faster aircraft turnaround times, and higher employee productivity—through higher relational coordination among frontline workers.[4] These unexpected findings opened up my eyes and made me ask the question, What could frontline leaders be doing to *support* relational coordination among their co-workers and what would happen if their numbers were drastically reduced?

ARM'S LENGTH LEADERSHIP DRIVEN BY PUNITIVE METRICS

American Airlines had reduced frontline leaders over the preceding decade as part of a company-wide effort to create a leaner, flatter organization with greater employee empowerment. Because of their large spans of control—33.8 frontline workers per supervisor on average for airport employees—supervisors had little time to carry out supportive functions. Instead of building shared goals with employees, working side by side with them and providing them with coaching and feedback, supervisors spent their limited time communicating performance standards and measuring performance.[5]

One typical comment from workers was that their supervisors "only care about delays. Otherwise, the little report card won't look good that week." The concern with delays, however, was not accompanied by supervisory efforts to analyze and engage in problem solving with frontline workers. Instead, the focus was on identifying the workgroup that appeared to be responsible for causing the delay and "pinning the delay" on that group, in order to comply with reporting requirements from headquarters and to pressure workers to improve performance. This reliance on performance measurement allowed for a largely hands-off relationship between supervisors and workers, consistent with the small number of supervisors in this airline.

To the extent that supervisors had time to focus on individual workers, they tended to monitor worker compliance with directives. According to one supervisor, "We only have time to focus on the bad apples." Nonmanagement "lead agents" were appointed from the frontline employee groups to assist the supervisors in carrying out supervisory functions. The agents' job was to help

the supervisor to direct operations, but they were not responsible for providing discipline, leadership, coaching, or feedback to the frontline employees. Because the lead agents were nonmanagement, and did not see themselves as management, they were not well positioned to align the goals of workers with those of the organization.

The supervisors themselves had little opportunity to bridge the management-nonmanagement divide or to participate in frontline work. They had few opportunities to observe the work process directly or to provide coaching and feedback to workers. They had little contact with individual workers, and therefore little opportunity to build the relationships and know-how that would allow them to play a facilitative role. In sum, at American Airlines supervisors' interactions with workers were quite limited, and tended to be replaced by the use of arm's length performance measures.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH COACHING AND FEEDBACK

At Southwest Airlines, the supervisory span of control was much narrower it was than at American; each supervisor was responsible for only 8.7 direct reports. In addition, the job of the supervisor went beyond the measuring of performance and disciplining of "bad apples" seen at American. Supervisors had managerial authority but also performed frontline work. "Management will always pitch in at crunch time," said a ramp supervisor. "Whatever it takes to get the plane out." Supervisors were observed to take part in frontline work on a regular basis, even highly physical work like baggage handling, and to wear the clothing appropriate to that work. "A supervisor fills in spots when people are on breaks, or when we are short on a zone," said another supervisor. "We make sure all the gates are manned and that everything is running smoothly, working in a timely manner. When agents see the supervisor working consistently, they give more in a crunch. Also, you get their respect by working with them." Working side by side with one's co-workers appeared to be conducive to building shared goals with them, and to developing the legitimacy and knowledge needed to provide effective coaching and feedback.

Frontline leaders at Southwest Airlines were observed to spend more time coaching and giving workers feedback than their counterparts at American.

Coaching and feedback took the form of problem solving and advising, rather than assessing compliance with performance objectives. "If there's a delay, supervisors find out why it happened," said the station manager. "We get ideas on how to do it better next time. If you've got that kind of relationship, then they're not going to be afraid. Say there was a ten-minute delay because freight was excessive. If we're screaming, we won't know why it was late." A ramp manager confirmed this approach:

> We work real hard to remove that barrier so that agents can come in and talk to a supervisor or manager. There's an open-door policy, so when employees have a problem, they know we can work on it together. It's a totally different environment here. We sit and listen. When that person walks away, he'll have self-esteem. I learned this when I came to work the ramp. Even when you did something wrong, they'll ask what happened. You know you screwed up. They'll tell you what you can do so it doesn't happen again. You walk away so upbeat that you work even harder.

There was some monitoring, but the frontline leadership role was not focused on discipline. "If there is a problem, like one person taking a three-hour lunch," said a supervisor, "they take care of that themselves for the most part. Peer pressure works well." Instead, supervisors told me that the people who reported to them were their "internal customers" and that their job was to help them do their jobs better. As one supervisor described her job:

> We are accountable for what the agents do. It is very difficult sometimes, because it's such a family-oriented company. You might feel like a sister to one of the agents, then you have to bring discipline. You have to step back and put the friendship aside and say, 'I don't agree with what you just did.' But the agents are our customers. We are here to help them do their jobs.

In sum, frontline leadership at Southwest Airlines was hands-on and primarily supportive in nature. It was not arm's length—interactions were intense, and performance measures were not used as a substitute for these interactions.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IS TIME-CONSUMING AND RELATIONSHIP INTENSIVE

As I tried to make sense of these findings, I learned that an earlier generation of organizational scholars—primarily from the human relations school of

thought—believed that effective leadership was both time-consuming and relationship intensive. According to organizational scholar Douglas McGregor:

> Roles cannot be clarified, mutual agreement concerning the responsibilities of a subordinate's job cannot be reached in a few minutes, nor can appropriate targets be established without a good deal of discussion. It is far quicker to hand a subordinate a position description and to inform him of his objectives for the coming period.[6]

Even the founder of scientific management, Frederick Winslow Taylor, noted, "More than all other causes, the close, intimate cooperation, the constant personal contact between the two sides, will tend to diminish friction and discontent. It is difficult for two people whose interests are the same, and who work side by side in accomplishing the same object all day long to keep up a quarrel."[7]

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP NEEDED FOR INTERDEPENDENT WORK

Just as relational coordination is particularly effective for highly interdependent work, relational leadership may also be particularly effective for highly interdependent work. Supporting this argument, empirical studies have consistently found that smaller spans of control are associated with more interdependent work. The benefits of smaller spans of control do not seem to stem from a greater need for coordination by supervisors. Researchers have found no significant increase in supervisory coordinating activities associated with more interdependent work. Instead, they have found that highly interdependent work benefits from an increase in coordination among frontline workers themselves.[8] So what could account for the benefit of narrower spans?

The evidence suggests that narrow spans lead to a more intimate and informal relationship between supervisors and frontline workers, establishing a context in which shared goals can be developed. Such relationships are particularly useful in highly interdependent work, where shared goals make a difference for performance. Narrow spans of control are also important in highly interdependent work processes because of the difficulty of getting useful feedback from the work itself, compared to independent tasks in which feedback emerges from the work in a relatively straightforward way. Supervisors can

play a role in helping workers to interpret the outcomes of their work. Others found that consultative leadership, leader behaviors that promote coordination, and leader initiating structure are particularly valuable in the presence of highly interdependent work. Multiple studies in which frontline workers must work interdependently to achieve a task have reported that groups with greater managerial presence performed better than those with greater autonomy.[9]

ANTI-LEADERSHIP ARGUMENTS PRESUME BUREAUCRATIC HIERARCHY

This idea that frontline leaders would have to be "taken out" in order to achieve employee empowerment was based on the assumption of bureaucracy. In bureaucratic organizations, the worker-manager relationship is defined by norms of hierarchy and power-over.[10] The hierarchy is intended to be a "hierarchy without domination," meaning that within each worker's job description there exists a realm of autonomy for that worker, who is thus protected by formal rules from outright domination. By contrast, the pre-bureaucratic organizational form—the clan—was driven by personal relationships and by personal forms of domination. A clan leader could legitimately command workers to do his or her bidding. In a very real sense, therefore, bureaucracy has been an evolutionary improvement over the clan.

Theories of street-level bureaucracy and job crafting confirm that workers do have a degree of autonomy in bureaucratic organizations, giving them some discretion within the confines of their job descriptions and even enabling them to shape their job descriptions. Workers can use this autonomy to withhold work effort. But they can also use it to take actions on behalf of particular customers, or to increase the meaning of the work, or to create personal connections with employees in other departments to get their work done.[11]

Effective use of autonomy is limited, however, when workers lack understanding due to their subordinate positions in the hierarchy and their disconnected role in the horizontal division of labor. Even in a hierarchy without domination, hierarchical leadership undermines relational coordination by keeping workers oriented toward the vertical lines of authority and unable to

systematically build shared knowledge and shared goals with their colleagues across reporting lines.[12] No wonder a generation of organizational scholars believed that to achieve employee empowerment, we would have to reduce the presence of leaders!

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO HIERARCHY

We are beginning to understand that leaders can play a powerful facilitative role in promoting and supporting relational coordination among frontline workers. How? Supporting relational coordination requires reciprocal relationships between workers and managers, in which managers learn from workers' deeper, more focused knowledge of the work, and workers learn from managers' broader contextual knowledge. Both kinds of knowledge are needed in complex organizations, where no one can possibly know everything in depth, and where each level is designed to have a successively deeper focus on the work—with knowledge and appreciation for what others know as well.

Relational leadership is exercised throughout the organization through reciprocal relating across levels. Mary Parker Follett described this type of leadership as "a coordinating of all functions, that is, a collective self-control." Achieving collective self-control, she argued, requires leadership to be distributed throughout the organization, rather than concentrated in a few positions. Follett observed organizations in which "[w]e find responsibility for management shot all through a business [and] some degree of authority all along the line [such that] leadership can be exercised by many people besides the top executive."[13] At the heart of relational leadership is recognizing the authority in each role, based on the knowledge associated with it. Rather than vesting authority in one person over another based on his or her position in the hierarchy, authority is shared.

After Follett, others argued that "the capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity and creativity in the solution of organizational problems is widely, not narrowly, distributed in the population [but] under the conditions of modern industrial life, the intellectual potentialities of the average human being are only partially utilized." To realize these potentialities,

leaders have to rely on integration and self-control by workers rather than on external direction and control, with leaders and workers engaging together to determine the goals of the organization and how best to achieve them.[14]

WHAT IS RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

Relational leadership creates influence by developing shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect *with* others and by developing shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect *among* others.[15] But how is this different, if at all, from distributed leadership, shared leadership, connective leadership, fluid expertise, and leading through humble inquiry?

Distributed leadership is a form of leadership that is carried out by both formal and informal leaders throughout the organization to facilitate the achievement of organizational objectives. Deborah Ancona and her colleagues have shown that leadership is a form of influence that can be exercised by participants at any level of an organization, and that leaders are most effective when they can inspire others to engage in the responsibilities of leadership, rather than attempt to carry out all leadership responsibilities on their own.[16] Distributed leadership thus requires facilitative leadership behaviors, more so than directive leadership behaviors, and transformative leadership behaviors more so than transactional or passive leadership behaviors. Lending support to this perspective, others have found that supportive supervisory behaviors predict greater frontline worker engagement in shared leadership.[17]

Relational leadership has much in common with the concept of distributed leadership. However, relational leadership does more than draw on the expertise and unique perspectives of participants throughout the organization; it also fosters the integration of their expertise and perspectives. Participants benefit from a more holistic perspective for understanding their own work and making decisions. This holistic perspective provides a mechanism through which they manage their interdependence. Relational leadership is therefore "connective leadership."

> Connective leadership derives its label from its character of connecting individuals not only to their own tasks and ego drives, but also to those of the group

> and community that depend upon the accomplishment of mutual goals. It is leadership that connects individuals to others and to others' goals, using a broad spectrum of behavioral strategies. It is leadership that "proceeds from a premise of connection" and a recognition of networks of relationships that bind society in a web of mutual responsibilities.[18]

Relational leadership is clearly a process of co-creation that requires a particular set of skills, as reflected in Joyce Fletcher's concept of "fluid expertise."

> [P]ower and/or expertise shifts from one party to the other, not only over time but in the course of one interaction. This requires two skills. One is a skill in empowering others; an ability to share—in some instances even customizing—one's own reality, skill, knowledge, etc., in ways that made it accessible to others. The other is skill in being empowered: an ability and willingness to step away from the expert role in order to learn from or be influenced by the other.[19]

Willingness to step away from the expert role in order to learn from others is also known as "leading through humble inquiry."[20] When designated leaders demonstrate this willingness, they help to create a safe space in which all participants can set aside their egos in order to connect for a shared purpose. Recall how Ed Schein created this space for himself, Amy Edmondson, and me to put our heads together to create the Relational Model of Organizational Change, as I described in the preface—putting into action the concept of leading through humble inquiry.

Leading through humble inquiry is foundational to the process of relational leadership. Note, however, that leading through humble inquiry does not require one to be humble in the sense of lacking confidence in one's own contributions. On the contrary, leading through humble inquiry requires having the confidence to recognize that one's contributions, however essential, are not sufficient to achieve the desired outcomes given the distribution of relevant expertise and the need for distinct areas of expertise to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the situation.

Relational leaders develop relationships *with* others in a way that serves to foster relationships *among* others, including relationships among co-workers and with their clients. Together, relational coordination, coproduction, and leadership represent ways of working together that transform professionalism

away from protecting one's own expertise toward a collaborative generative process with potential benefits for all stakeholders.[21]

CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE: RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Let's consider a case in which relational leadership was used to create a collaborative generative process among professionals and with their clients, replacing a more fragmented hierarchical process.[22] Dr. Michele Saysana, now medical director of quality and safety at Riley Hospital for Children, led the adoption of family-centered rounds in 2008. Riley is part of the eighteen-hospital Indiana University Health system, headquartered in Indianapolis, with a presence throughout the state. Saysana explained:

> We used to do rounds very differently. We would round at the bedside, but it was the old internal medicine model. We talked to each other in front of the patient then told them what we were going to do. Definitely not in ways they would understand. Or we would round in a conference room, then we'd go out and see the patients separately, and try to track down the family.

In the new rounds, residents and medical students were asked to present to the family rather than to the attending physician. Presenting to the family changes the dynamics and the language used, in a way that is beneficial yet highly challenging.

> We are not allowed to talk the way we do in the conference room. It is so hard for medical students. It makes them nervous. They are nervous to be presenting to the family anyway, and nervous to be using regular language—they think using medical jargon is a sign of their knowledge. I say no, it tells me even more if you can translate to the patient. It totally throws the students for a loop. Sometimes they even call the patient "the diagnosis." We have to spend time on that. But we let them know that we're like a big safety net. If they get something wrong, I will correct it right there but in a way that's respectful. Then the family, the nurse, the social worker, and the pharmacist all understand the plan of care and hear the same plan of care. They know how we explained it so they can continue to reinforce it after the rounds.
>
> The other thing is that everybody is there, so everybody hears. That's worth its weight in gold. Especially the families who are having a hard time with social

> issues—when everybody on the team hears the same thing, that makes it easier for us to all work together as a team.
>
> And with this way of doing rounds we can do a lot of teaching. We can even teach about conflict resolution. We can discuss conflict resolution in a conference room; but we can really role model it in a room with a family. We can teach medical students and residents how to help a family in need. In the room I can teach about communication skills, about relationships, about having difficult conversations, about giving bad news. You'll have to do these every day.

The new way of rounding also called for new patterns of communication between physicians and other members of the care team. As Saysana summed it up, "You have to engage the nurses, ask them what concerns they have about this patient. You have to be intentional about doing it . . . It's not just having the rounds that makes the relationships good between doctors and nurses—it's *how* we do them."

The new process resulted in more accurate and timely communication, enabling hospitals to discharge patients earlier in the day, and with fewer delays. Soon after the implementation of family-centered rounds at Riley, EEGs and MRIs were being completed in 1.73 hours, compared to the 2.15 hours it had taken prior to the rounds. Moreover, 47 percent of patients were being discharged on the first shift, compared with 40 percent of patients prior to family-centered rounds.

Family-centered rounds represented a new collaborative generative process, requiring new skills and a new kind of leadership. The physicians leading the rounds had to engage in relational leadership to enable them to coordinate with their colleagues, their colleagues to coordinate with each other, and everyone to engage with the family in a respectful way to create shared goals and shared knowledge.

Relational leadership was also needed *outside* the family-centered rounds to bring Saysana's colleagues on board. She described a collective effort that relied on positive contagion rather than formal authority, given that she had no formal leadership role at the time; even if she had such a role, it would not have been sufficient to ensure successful adoption of rounds.

> I would say, "Come on! Why can't we do this? Why can't we try this?" The formal leader of our service supported it but really encouraged us to have a discussion

about it. He did not tell us we had to do it, but instead he really supported us visiting another hospital and figuring out how we could do it . . . And the other medical services were not really interested in doing it. Then our intensive care unit started it. Those who started it were not the chiefs . . . It was not formal, it just kind of spread on its own.

Relational leadership is a process of reciprocal interrelating that requires respectful consideration of resistance as well as agreement from others. Rather than write off the resistance she faced as "resistance to change" or ascribe it to selfish motives, Saysana saw it as containing potentially valuable information about obstacles that deserved respectful consideration and that needed to be addressed.

The biggest pushback was from the person who is now my biggest advocate. He wanted to know, How are we going to do this? What if the medical student says in front of the family that the child might have cancer? Well they already do, I said, but you don't hear it. He still didn't want to do the rounds in the room, because he felt it would put the students on the spot. In the beginning some of the residents and students didn't really like it. They said it's going to be awkward, take too long. We really had to sell it to them. We told them, "We're going room to room and we're going to do *all* the work together."

The nurses really wanted to do this. Typically, we as physicians make all the big decisions and they have to do all the work. The pushback we got from some of the nurses was "What about these families that want to take up all your time?" I said, "We can come back." But what we find is, we tell the families up front what's going on and then they don't have so many questions later.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS RELATIONAL COORDINATION AND COPRODUCTION

The successful adoption of family-centered rounding at Riley Hospital for Children involved all three forms of reciprocal interrelating. *Relational coordination* was created in the exchange and collaboration across different professions. *Relational coproduction* emerged as these professionals developed shared knowledge and shared goals with the clients themselves. Finally, these new relational patterns were introduced and sustained by a leadership process—*relational leadership*—that embodied and reinforced the same values. As

participants experienced a work environment of greater responsiveness and respect, they were able to turn to their colleagues and clients and treat them in the same way.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT CREATING CONNECTION

Relational leadership is clearly about how leaders connect *with others*—both with their peers and with those who report to them—and it's also about how they connect *others with each other*. According to Carsten Hornstrup, consultant and author of *Developing Strategic Relational Leadership*:

> Strategic relational leadership focuses on how the quality of communication and strong relationships—shared knowledge, shared goals and mutual respect—especially between top and middle managers, impacts the ability to effectively implement desired changes. I have personally found three interconnected elements that play a vital role in creating capacity for change.
>
> The first element is engaging in direct dialogues with key stakeholders. Leaders who do this seem to earn more respect and this respect rubs off on the legitimacy on their decisions. The next element is building strategic competence. It attends to the ways that top and middle managers are able to create clarity around expectations about how people should take part in change activities and how their activities promote or prevent cross professional and cross organizational collaboration. What I find is that in cultures where leaders support and promote attention to supporting the success of others—across professions and organizational columns—they create a vital awareness of the larger whole.
>
> The third element is creating engagement in change activities and ownership of the goals of change. It has to do with how people are invited to take part in change activities from decision making to implementation. What seems to be especially important is how critical voices are included or excluded from these processes.[23]

THE NARRATIVE OF THE SINGLE HEROIC LEADER

Although relational leadership is a powerful process with the potential to support high performance, Deborah Ancona of the MIT Leadership Center argues that it's not easy to get it right. Charles Palus of the Center for Creative Leadership argues that "this type of leadership is just a fact of life now. There's

more interdependence and this way of leading fits the new reality . . . But it's hard to move culture. It ultimately happens at the front line, and it's the work of leaders to do it."[24]

One of the challenges is to overcome the narrative of the heroic leader, which has been embedded in many cultures over many hundreds of years. Even collective accomplishments, achieved by hundreds of people through many strategic negotiations, are seen as the accomplishments of a single leader; for example, in reporting the development and promotion of a new national policy by the Obama administration, the media tells it as a story of presidential leadership, whether in praise or blame. In place of the heroic leader, we need to embrace the notion of the "incomplete leader," Ancona argues. Incomplete leaders are strong individuals who understand both their strengths and limitations through self-awareness. Under conditions of interdependence, even the smartest person in the room cannot get anything done by him- or herself and cannot know enough to either set the goals or achieve the goals alone.

Nevertheless, strong individuals are still needed for effective relational leadership. As Palus argued, "Strong individuals make strong collectives, and weak individuals make dysfunctional collectives." Instead of abandoning the notion of the heroic leader, perhaps we need to redefine heroic leaders as those who engage the hearts and minds of others to build collective efforts.

DEVELOPING CAPACITY FOR RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

How do we develop the capacity for this new kind of leadership? First, we must move beyond the idea that leaders are born, and ask instead how we can develop people's capacity to lead. Becoming a collaborative leader requires taking the time to reflect on our own experiences and to develop our own personal narrative, Palus argues. "To participate in leadership, we have to develop. We have to grow up."

Some youth today are rejecting the word "leader," Ancona has observed, due to the work they perceive is involved and due to the negative connotations of leadership. Youth have grown up observing leaders who fumble and get beaten up in today's transparent world, where confidentiality seems impossible to achieve. They see that it is very easy to go from heroic leader to

fallen leader. The paradox is that the youth who reject the word "leadership" often demonstrate leadership on issues they are passionate about, according to Ancona. Millennials may not embrace the idea of becoming "the leader" because of its outmoded connotations. But they are very ready to participate in leadership, creating another reason for organizations to move toward distributed leadership.

> Millennials have had a lot of freedom and do not want to step into an organization where they can't [have] that. If we want to attract and retain them, we will have to change. I would rather have people who want to change the world who don't call themselves leaders than people who call themselves leaders but who aren't passionate about changing the world.

SUMMING UP

In this chapter, we have seen the power of leaders to foster relational coordination among colleagues and to foster relational coproduction with clients by role modeling desired behaviors and by coaching and cajoling others to do the same. But no matter how effective leaders are in supporting the development of relational coordination among workers and relational coproduction with clients, there is only so much they can accomplish through personal influence. Another important role of leaders is to support the development of organizational structures that shape behaviors in the firm. Though they are invisible to the eye, these structures shape and support relational dynamics in powerful ways. For relational leaders, this means that in addition to creating connections through personal coaching and role modeling, they must also support the development of constructive relational dynamics through the design of structures.

Organization design does not mean conceptualizing in a vacuum how the organization should function. It does not mean mandating from above how things will be done. Rather, for relational leaders, organization design means promoting structures to support the connections that are needed to carry out the work effectively, particularly when it spans multiple departments or organizations. Let us turn to this topic next.