

Developing Australian Leaders

Victor J. Callan, Greg Latemore

In designing leadership and development programs and workshops, we have been applying the metaphor of the inner and the outer theatre. This metaphor opens up some new ways of thinking about many well-established learning tools that we use as management educators. Effective leaders develop a balance between acute self-awareness (inner theatre) and genuine connection with others (outer theatre). This metaphor also helps educators to pay attention to the leader as a person in their own right. Strategies for developing this inner theatre include structured reflection, journaling, and feedback. Processes for developing the outer theatre are just as important, and include case studies, coaching, walk-talk pairs, panels and debates, executives-in-residence, and action-learning projects. We find that this mix of instructor-directed and learner-directed strategies, combined with the continued support for managers back in the workplace, is assisting many managers to change, and to grow as leaders.

Introduction

Management educators have many critical decisions to make as they craft the content and processes that they hope will open up new and exciting learning opportunities for their students or corporate clients. As Loewenstein and his colleagues (2003) observe, the decisions and choices can actually be quite daunting. In executive education and corporate programs, these choices include selecting content and processes that recognise differences in learner maturity (Smith & Delahaye, 1987), responding to variations in the amount of knowledge that managers have already about a subject area, and the degree to which the learner is willing to accept the responsibility to learn, especially if the learner disagrees with their manager about why they need to attend a course or program. Further, there is still debate about what should be the balance between theory and application in management pedagogy (Wren, Halbesleben & Buckley 2007).

In addition, there is the choice between two contrasting instructional styles (Knowles, 1975). Adopting a pedagogical style that is more instructor-driven style often means that the presenters of executive education make many of the key decisions about appropriate program design, content and processes. These decisions are based on past experiences in working with similar levels of managers, discussions with senior managers and the human resource managers in the organization, and meetings and observations of potential participants. Andragogical instructional styles, in contrast, are more learner-centred or self-directed, and adult learners exert more control over their own learning experiences. Our experience is that managers as mature learners appreciate a mix of instructor-driven and learner-driven styles. They respond well to facilitators who move between delivering ideas and facilitating the progress of these ideas through stages of critique, debate and reflection that are mostly learner-driven. As Kayes (2002) notes, the four general agendas in management learning are processes around action, cognition, reflection and experience. In particular, managers want to explore at the cognitive, emotional and experiential levels the inner theatre of their managing and leading, as much as their outer theatre or external presentation as leaders through their actual behaviours. We recognise with Walton (2005:27) a

situation of 'person neglect in leadership and executive education': our focus on the inner theatre might well address his concern that functional leaders tend to possess little self-insight or people management.

Our aim here is to explore briefly some of the strategies that we find are assisting Australia and other managers to explore, at a number of levels, new ideas and behaviours about their managing and leading. In describing these experiences, we illustrate a mix of teacher-driven and more learner-driven processes that are organised around a framework of the inner and outer theatre of managing. This metaphor has operated both implicitly, and quite explicitly, in our interaction with managers in shaping the content and processes used both in MBA classes, but also in executive education.

The inner and outer theatre of leadership

There is no shortage of scholarly advice about how to design sound management education and leadership development (e.g. Kayes, 2002; Rynes, Trank, Lawson & Ilies, 2003; Grey, 2004). In fact, the major challenge is be different, and to seek out paradigms that offer new opportunities for developing managers and leaders, and for developing ones craft, and continued career, as a management educator. For many years, we experimented, and ultimately then designed, the content and processes in our leadership programs around the metaphor that we describe as the inner and outer theatre. Kets de Vries (2001) has also talked about this same inner theatre of the executive. The metaphor of the theatre is a powerful one for leaders, with wide descriptive and connotative meaning. For example, most of us would have been to a movie theatre and perhaps seen a play. There are various elements at work. Apart from the actors and the script, there is a whole range of support personnel, facilities and technologies to bring the final product to entertain or to inform an audience. The audience witnesses this performance, and the experience comes alive in their thoughts and feelings. However slight, their interaction as an audience enhances or inhibits this personal experience as an individual audience member. There is usually a clear structure to movies and plays. The *dramatis personae* are introduced, the plot unfolds, characters develop (or not) and the plot comes to a resolution (or not). The audience judges the performance on a variety of subtle criteria. Sometimes, rewards are even allocated for the best performances.

As with a good movie or play, it can be argued that the credibility of the leader's performances hinges upon whether he or she can 'get into role'. Further, leaders need to rely upon others to help convey their message, a point that seems understated by Tichy (2002) in *The Cycle of Leadership* where he focuses mainly upon the leader's own 'teachable point of view'. Good leaders want their people to harness their own thoughts and feelings to achieve organizational outcomes. In addition, leaders know that when and how they present messages to their people is crucial for clarity and commitment, and like good comic actors, good leaders know the importance of timing. Recently, a legal firm we work with used the Academy Awards as a metaphor for their end-of-year staff party. Staff were collected in limousines, and arrived on a red carpet at a local restaurant to thunderous applause from a 'rent-a-crowd'. They were interviewed by local television personalities as they entered the restaurant, and enjoyed an evening of awards under various categories over a sumptuous dinner. The original founder (one of the partners dressed in 18th century costume) made a guest appearance beyond the grave to congratulate and thank everyone for his or her efforts. The whole experience was exhilarating, and the organization is still captivated by this theatrical experience. This theatre also established many stories and storytelling opportunities that have sustained and grown the new culture to which the legal partners are aspiring.

The experience of leadership is often like 'theatre in the round', in that the leader is always 'on show', whether they intend to be or not. Not surprisingly, Disney theme parks employ a theatrical language. Their employees are 'cast members', and whenever they are working with the public, they are 'on stage' (Peters & Waterman, 1984). Without stretching the metaphor too far, at times,

the experience of leadership is also akin to the 'theatre of the absurd'. Some of what the leader does is for pure show. A lot of time seems to be spent on activities that seem to add little value. Farce is alive and well in the workplace. Scott Adams' *Dilbert* series is popular, precisely because it highlights and parodies the absurdities of organizational life. More serious studies and observations of managers at work also highlight the theatre of the absurd, especially the political games for power and prestige (e.g. Mintzberg, 1973; McCall, Lombardo & Morrison, 1988). One of the challenges for leaders, is that while building a personal 'brand' (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2007), they must still strive to connect authentically (Goffee & Jones 2006) with their people in the midst of this somewhat 'theatrical' role.

In designing executive education programs, we have combined many well-established learning strategies to develop this inner and outer theatre, and in doing so, showcase the personal and organizational realities, as well as the absurdities. The next section describes some of these learning elements.

Developing the inner theatre

How can one think successfully as a leader about what is salient (Martin 2007) without personal reflection and self-insight? Reflection has been shown to foster insight, spontaneity and mindfulness (Sadler-Smith & Shefy 2007). Critical reflection is a major learning element in executive education. In our programs, it is one of the major devices used to construct and to explore the inner theatre. Although reflection is a natural and familiar process, many busy managers do lose touch with the use of reflection as a tool for making sense out of their organizational and personal life experiences (Daudelin, 1996). Reflective approaches help managers to free themselves of old mental models, and to question perspective-limiting assumptions. The process of self-disclosing and questioning leads many managers to embrace opportunities to develop fresh perspectives about their leadership habits (Kayes, 2002). Some managers come to executive education programs expecting to be entertained by the facilitators and their peers. Reflection helps them entertain themselves, often at surprisingly deep cognitive and emotional levels of self-discovery.

Driving reflection is the powerful use of appropriate open-ended questions (e.g. "What did you do when you were at your best as a leader? How did you feel?" or "Why would anyone want to be lead by you?"); the feedback from many of the diagnostics tools that are now available, including 360 degree feedback when it is introduced and managed around an appropriate a set of guiding principles (see Toegel & Conger, 2003); the use of memorable stories from articles and cases; and journaling (Progoff, 1992). As Socrates put it: "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Tredennick, 1954). Writing about experiences generates emotions and deeper meaning (Kolb, 1984). We encourage managers to explore their inner theatre by writing about their thoughts, experiences, feelings, dreams and decisions. This process is akin to what actors do when they learn a new script for a play or movie. They are expected not just to learn the words of the stage play or the movie script, but also to explore the character of the role, and to develop insight about the thoughts and feelings of these characters.

The psychoanalytic essays of Kets de Vries (2001) provide many examples of how successful leaders, like successful actors, must learn to respond to fame and ego inflation. Followers and fans can displace their hopes and fantasies onto leaders. Kotter (1985) describes the phenomena of counter dependence and overdependence by subordinates that leads some managers to perceive themselves as perfect and infallible (see similar observations by Goleman, 1995; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002; Latemore, 2001; Lombardo, Usher & McCauley, 2001). For many managers, the metaphor of the inner theatre serves to open up for discussion the concept of false personae. Interestingly in Jungian psychology, individuation or wholeness is best achieved by being aware of, and ideally, removing such personae. In the Greek mystery plays, it is well known that the actors wore masks when playing their roles. The audience could engage

with the drama on stage only when the actors spoke through (per) the sound hole (sona). Similarly, in talking about the inner theatre, leaders are encouraged to become more aware of the various masks that they wear. One irony is that leaders play a role and need to play it well, but that is not all they are as people. Like the character Stanley Ipkiss (played by Jim Carrey) in the film *Mask*, leaders need to avoid over-identifying with their role, lest they become trapped in it.

Psychodrama is another valuable device that a skilled facilitator can apply to help a leader to confront the inner world of their self-talk and their patterns of behaviour. It is somewhat like 'counselling with props'. After pacing and mirroring the leader's present responses, the facilitator helps the subject find new insights and strategies by anchoring new patterns. Such 'influencing with integrity' takes time, a skilled director, rapport and a clear and respectful psychological contract between leader and director. Great actors spend many hours practising their craft and rehearsing their roles. Rehearsal for encounters in the workplace, especially difficult ones, is effective for leaders as well. We have used role training and psychodrama to equip leaders as they prepare for a major speech at a company's Annual General Meeting, a major presentation to the board, or for an important product launch.

Developing the outer theatre

Notwithstanding that Mintzberg (2004) and others continue to criticise the utility of Harvard-style cases, the case study is still an ancient and respected tool for educating leaders. Aristotle mentored Alexander the Great using cases, and helped the young Alexander to develop practical expertise in recognising strategic patterns before he assumed his Macedonian military endeavours (Bose, 2004). In executive programs, cases do work well when they are sufficiently complex, but also memorable in their major messages about learning, change and leadership. They provide practice in data collection and analysis, as well as the need to question, listen and connect with others to build a solution, or to provide a critique. Good cases and processes build the inductive skills of managers, and help them to establish principles about managing and leading (see Locke, 2002). Using the concept of the outer theatre, our Business School has developed the concept of live case studies or live theatre. The theatre begins with a well-known CEO providing the background behind a major decision that his or her business had to make, quite often in response to a crisis (e.g. a public recall of an unsafe product; a major financial crisis). The audience is asked what they would do in these circumstances. After the report on what they would have done, the CEO describes what actually happened, whether it was effective or not, and with hindsight, how might the organization have done it differently.

In exploring the outer theatre, coaching offers 'deep support' (Zuboff & Maxim, 2002). In the theatre, actors have a variety of voice and dramatic coaches. As Dovey (2005) has described, expert coaches create a safe climate, where respect and trust are evident, and where the shared life-world of leaders can be supported and challenged. In our experiences as coaches who are looking for new ways to coach, we encourage the use of novel challenges that take managers into what we call, "the theatre of the real world". One manager developed a new energy for leadership by doing weekend volunteer work with street people; another learnt to listen more effectively by sitting, talking with and reading to older citizens and dementia patients in a retirement home; another further developed his creativity by engaging in parallel play with his grandchildren; and a group of senior leaders applied their considerable strategic and financial experience to assist several community not-for-profit groups to write business plans and proposals to seek public funding.

One theatrical role that a good leader often employs is that of the story-teller (Kaye, 1996). Good actors are very often great story-tellers. As Atkinson (1995) asserts, stories provide important functions in bringing us more in accord with ourselves, others, and with life. In our programs, we encourage participants to tell stories, and to choose and to practice certain stories that reinforce the core values that they want displayed in their organizational cultures. Some even argue that there is a mythological element to storytelling, in that we are connected to the ancients who have

walked the 'journey' before us (see Callan & Latemore, 1998). In a similar way, employing certain movie scenes during leadership development activities can powerfully and succinctly illustrate important messages for leaders. For example, a few scenes from the movie *What Women Want* (played by Mel Gibson) can illustrate the need for leaders to become more aware of their own blind spots and the facades of others. The battle speech by William Wallace in *Braveheart* (again played by Mel Gibson) illustrates the importance of clear, confident language to capture the hearts of followers. Various scenes from the *Star Wars* series depict the behaviour of Luke Skywalker's coaches, Ben Kenobi and Yoda. Of course, in many of our cultures, spinning yarns and telling stories has long been a tradition used to reinforce core value and beliefs (see McCann & Stewart 1997).

Also the outer theatre of managers can be facilitated by the use of a variety of guest actors. Outside experts from indigenous groups, charitable bodies, and various religious leaders take centre stage to present their views and experiences on topics like spirituality, minority group experiences, and community perceptions of the participants' organizations. Also, customers and suppliers of the organization take the stage to describe their positive and negative experiences in dealing with the organization or its industry. Another group of players are given special roles, or what we call "Executives-in-residence". These executives also as guest actors are senior managers in the company, and are senior to the managers in the program. They tell their personal story about their journey as a leader, their successes and failures, and their hopes for their organization and the communities that they serve. Executives-in-residence works best for lower to middle level leaders attending a developmental program. Telling it like it is, they provide very powerful role models for the audience about the challenges, and benefits, in exploring their inner and outer theatre. Despain and Bodman (2003) give an account of a similar process used at Caterpillar.

Finally, the reality of the challenges facing managers can be brought into the program through the use of action-learning projects. Action learning projects honour all styles of learning: creative discussion, information gathering, practical instruction and self-discovery (Kolb, 1984). They bring the theatre of the organization into the program, as action-learning projects typically involve solving organizational problems using teams that move through a cycle of action, reflection, learning and renewed action. These projects work best when small groups of managers dedicate time outside the program, working on an issue that is meaningful to their organization (content), while also learning to work with and influence a team of peers (process). The results of the projects are presented at a later time to their coaches, their executives-in-residence and their program sponsors. Action learning is supported by evidence that most managers learn about leadership on the job, from observing good and bad role models, and from resolving organizational challenges and personal hardships (Lombardo et al., 2001).

Conclusion

Leadership development makes a difference when it involves sound learning processes that honour and enrich both the inner and the outer theatres of leadership awareness. Development opportunities for managers make a difference when they encourage self-discovery, questioning and learning about managerial practices and leadership behaviours (Kayes, 2002). The metaphor of the theatre, and especially of the inner and outer theatre, has provided us with a new way to think about the use of many well-established management development tools. Assigning these learning tools around the concepts of an inner and outer theatre is providing us with new ways to explore how executive education can channel managers into reflection, learning, self-exploration and change. But as this article reveals, we are still experimenting, and we have some way to go. Most importantly, we look forward to reading the accounts of other management educators as they design content and processes that keeps them fresh, and encourages their manager participants and students to open up, to challenge and to change.

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